ABSTRACT

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

THROUGH A STRENGTHS-BASED MINISTRY PROCESS

by

Christopher Mark Howlett

The study addressed the need for the equipping of laity for ministry by discovering their God-given strengths in order to increase their sense of psychological well-being. Recent findings in positive psychology suggest that the greater amount of time individuals spend using their strengths in meaningful activities, the higher the level of psychological well-being they experience. The study sought to explore connections among the concepts of psychological well-being, the utilization of strengths in ministry activities, and the unique personhood of each individual child of God, created in the image of God.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact on psychological well-being of laypersons at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process. The process included Gallup's Clifton StrengthsFinder®, a researcher-designed and led four-hour seminar titled Serving with Your Strengths, an individualized coaching session, and the deployment of their strengths in ministry. The process sought to empower people to discover and use their strengths in ministry activities. The study used an explanatory mixed-methods design to glean data from both quantitative and qualitative research tools. When analyzed the data revealed the change in levels of

psychological well-being and insight into what parts of the strengths-based ministry process generated the change.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

As a brand new, part-time pastor, still pursuing a university degree, I experienced tremendous frustration attempting to fill sixty ministry slots with thirty people. Average worship attendance at this small, semi-rural United Methodist Church was thirty, including ten children. Leading such a small flock, the Annual Conference insisted on tasking me with completing a nominations form for Charge Conference consisting of sixty positions. We did what many churches do: filled in the blanks, asking people to serve in as many as four slots to satisfy an ill-fitting church structure. In this system, persons inevitably occupy roles for which they lack the gifts, talents, and skills to serve effectively and joyfully. Deploying Christians in this slot-driven mode results in frustration and guilt. The flip side of the coin was that both the conference and the local church expected me, a part-time student local pastor, to fulfill all the responsibilities enumerated in Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*. I possessed neither the time nor the inclination to do the entire ministry for the entire congregation. I inherently knew that the people over whom the bishop gave me charge were gifted and talented and God wanted to use them for his kingdom purposes in ways that were consistent with who he created them to be.

Unfortunately, people often feel unsure of their ministry potential. They resent service placements based on the most pressing needs of the church rather than the unique contribution they could be equipped to make. They live generally disengaged from and unaware of their own uniqueness, talents, gifts, and strengths. The people of God do not

experience fulfillment in their lives as God intends. Jesus, stating his purpose for his ministry, said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV). The abundant life is lacking in many, if not most, Christ followers in the United States.

Evidence of this lack of an abundant life is the deficiency of Christ followers regularly engaged in ministry activities, in either local churches or parachurch organizations. The cliché of the 80-20 rule is the reality of ministry in a variety of settings: 20 percent of the people accomplishing 80 percent of the ministry. One of the unfortunate results of this noninvolvement, in addition to a lack of kingdom-building ministry, is that persons, created by God in his image, with unique gifts, talents, and strengths, miss the opportunity to engage in activities that result in life satisfaction. This unfortunate situation prevents church members from experiencing the abundant life God intends. In many ways the consumer-driven approach to ministry, promoted by both laity and clergy, laity focused on unhealthy felt needs and clergy living out of a need to be needed, conspire to keep persons from fulfilling their function of accomplishing the works of ministry God created them to do, robbing them of the happiness that results from living out their purpose in life.

John Wesley notes, “As the more holy we are upon earth the more happy we must be (seeing there is an inseparable connection between holiness and happiness); as the more good we do to others the more of present reward redounds into our own bosom” (2: 431). He links holiness and happiness in this famous statement, noting that doing good, as an expression of holiness, is the key to happiness. Examining the biblical record clearly also reveals this connection. God plans for humans to experience happiness

through holiness by being equipped to serve, thus building up the body of Christ and growing the people of God to maturity. However, clarity concerning the causation of this relationship proves elusive. The current study proposes to reveal a link in the chain connecting true happiness and life lived as God intends: redeemed by Christ and equipped for good works by the Holy Spirit.

Recent findings in positive psychology suggest that one of the keys to living a fulfilling and happy life is regularly engaging in activities that utilize the unique set of human strengths possessed by each person (Seligman, "Can Happiness" 161). The Gallup Organization developed an assessment tool, the Clifton StrengthsFinder®, based on this research in human happiness to help persons discern their top five signature talents. The tool is readily available as an online survey paired with a number of books published by Gallup. The focus of most of the literature on strengths is work related; however, a potential exists for broad application of the discoveries of positive psychology for ministry. When people discover their strengths and regularly engage in ministry activities, employing their strengths, they experience higher levels of happiness and more ministry is accomplished. Positive psychology and biblical theology converge to produce a new paradigm for equipping the people of God for ministry, empowering them not only to build for the kingdom but also to discover lasting happiness in the process.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact on psychological well-being, referred to in this study as happiness, of laypersons at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process. The process included Gallup's

Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, a researcher-led seminar, Serving with Your Strengths, a strengths coaching session, and the deployment of their strengths in ministry.

Research Questions

The following three research questions revealed whether or not, and to what extent, engagement in the strengths-based ministry process led to a higher level of psychological well-being in participants' lives.

Research Question #1

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being prior to the strengths-based ministry process?

Research Question #2

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being following the strengths-based ministry process, and what changes, if any, occurred?

Research Question #3

What elements of the strengths-based ministry process—the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment, Serving with Your Strengths seminar, individualized coaching session, and ministry by strengths—contributed to the changes in psychological well-being of the participants?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are pertinent to the study, and although the words themselves are easily understood, confusion over the exactness of their application to everyday life and ministry remains problematic.

Psychological Well-Being

The scientific literature closely relates psychological well-being to *happiness*. Psychologists consider it "a broad concept that includes experiencing pleasant emotions, low levels of negative moods, and high life satisfaction" (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 63). Happiness is not a fleeting feeling or jovial frame of mind that waxes and wanes readily according to changing circumstances. Happy people maintain a sense of consistent fulfillment and peace of mind through the natural ebb and flow of both positive and negative emotions. Carol D. Ryff, says that having psychological well-being and its components "is to possess positive self-regard, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships with other people, a sense of purposefulness and meaning in life, and feelings of continued growth and development" ("Psychological Well-Being" 103).

Strength

Martin E. P. Seligman, a leader in the field of positive psychology, defines a strength as something that is measurable, acquirable, and ubiquitous across cultures, "a psychological characteristic that can be seen across different situations and over time," something valued in its own right, not only by the results it produces (*Authentic Happiness* 137). Donald O. Clifton, the pioneer of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment defines a strength as "consistent near perfect performance in an activity" (Buckingham and Clifton 25). P. Alex Linley and Susan Harrington define a strength as "a natural capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes" (39). In this study, I define strength as a valuable and developable inherent human characteristic that enables a

person to perform at consistently high levels, producing feelings of timelessness, a heightened sense of self, and satisfaction.

Strengths-Based Ministry Process

The strengths-based ministry process consisted of a researcher-designed four-hour seminar, titled Serving with Your Strengths, and a follow-up individualized strengths-coaching session led by a trained strengths coach to assist participants in affirming their areas of talents and provide feedback toward developing talents into strengths, using them in life, career, and ministry.

Ministry Intervention

I developed a strengths-based ministry process. This process began by helping participants discover their top five talents using the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment tool. The process also included a four-hour seminar titled Serving with Your Strengths, teaching theological, biblical, and psychological findings on human talents and strengths. The seminar consisted of lecture and open discussion. Participants attended a follow-up individualized coaching session. The coach and participant discussed the participant's top five talents, ways to develop those talents into strengths, and strategies to deploy them in ministry. I used the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to measure participants' self-report on levels of psychological well-being, both before and after the strengths-based ministry process (see Appendix B).

Context

The study was conducted within two United Methodist congregations, Christ Church United Methodist and Versailles United Methodist Church (UMC). Christ Church is located in a suburban community that is part of a county with a population of 260,000

persons. The average worship attendance is two hundred. The constituents of the Christ Church tend to be younger and more affluent than the typical church in Kentucky. Versailles UMC is located in the Woodford County seat of Versailles, with a population of approximately 8,600. The average worship attendance is 225. The constituents of Versailles UMC reflect a wider age range, though still younger than the typical church in Kentucky, and they are more affluent than the general population, reflecting the professional and upper class.

Participants of the study were self-selected by responding to a general invitation offered to the congregations to participate in the strengths-based ministry process, which I led. The participant sample accurately represented the make up of the two congregations.

Methodology

This study measured the change in the level of psychological well-being, also referred to as happiness in the literature, of laypersons at Christ Church and Versailles UMC who participated in a strengths-based ministry process that consisted of the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment, a seminar, Serving with Your Strengths, and an individualized coaching session, which encouraged participants to affirm their strengths and deploy those strengths in ministry activities. I conducted a follow-up interview with each participant to determine how the process impacted him or her. The study spanned a three-month period.

The study utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods design, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. To collect quantitative data, I utilized the standardized Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales immediately prior to the strengths-

based ministry process in order to determine the participants' baseline level of psychological well-being, or happiness. I used the Ryff Scales a second time following the process to provide a comparison of the pre- and post-process levels of psychological well-being.

Participants discovered their top five talent themes using the Clifton StrengthsFinder® online assessment. The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is a proprietary online instrument used by the Gallup Organization to identify areas where an individual's greatest potential for developing strengths exists (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 3).

Qualitative data was collected through the employ of a semi-structured interview protocol in order to discern which portions of the strengths-based ministry process were helpful in discovering and engaging participants' strengths in ministry activities and how the process contributed to each participant's sense of psychological well-being.

Participants

Participants in the study attended one of two researcher-designed and led seminars, Serving with Your Strengths, on Sunday, 16 October 2011 at Christ Church and Saturday, 7 January 2012 at Versailles UMC. They were attracted to the class by their desire for self-discovery and to be equipped for ministry. Thirteen people participated in the seminar and responded to the quantitative questionnaires at Christ Church, and seven at Versailles UMC. They varied in age from 24 to 64 years. The group was a racially diverse. I used a semi-structured protocol to interview all of the participants and for the qualitative portion of the project.

Instrumentation

The Clifton StrengthsFinder®, developed by the Gallup Organization, is a 180-item online assessment tool designed to determine participants' top five signature talents or potential strengths. The assessment scores measure proclivities based on thirty-four themes of talent, although participants receive only the top five. They then use these top five to focus their efforts of self-improvement and service in ministry.

I used the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to measure six dimensions of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. I utilized the scales both prior to and following the strengths-based ministry process. I compared the pre- and post-process scores to determine the impact of the process on the psychological well-being of the participants.

In addition to the standardized instruments, I designed the process effectiveness questionnaire, a semi-structured interview protocol, to determine what portions of the process contributed to participants' increase of psychological well-being. I conducted this protocol following the strengths-based ministry process.

Variables

This study included one independent variable, the strengths-based ministry process at Christ Church. The primary dependent variable was the change in level of psychological well-being, self-reported, using the Ryff Scales. Intervening variables included knowledge of strengths, ministry involvement, and the degree to which participants deployed their strengths in ministry activities.

A variety of intervening variables could influence participants' psychological well-being over the three months between the first and second measurements. Some factors prove more obvious; others not. One of the possible variables weighing in a major negative impact on happiness is a significant loss. While Christ followers may contextualize loss in healthier ways than do nonbelievers, a major loss by anyone, no matter how spiritually and emotionally mature, negatively impacts psychological well-being. Negative life events decrease a person's ability to experience happiness, so any number of potentialities might negatively impact the study results.

Data Collection

I solicited participants for the project through bulletin announcements, church e-mail newsletter announcements, worship announcements, and personal invitations. I carried out the first administration of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales prior to the strengths-based ministry process. Each individual participant, then took Clifton StrengthsFinder® online assessment, provided by Gallup. StrengthsFinder® produced a report of participants' top five talents, which they printed and brought to the seminar.

I administered the second Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales ninety days following the individualized coaching session. The incentive for completing the process was the participants' own sense of altruism and personal invitations by me. I conducted the semi-structured interviews in person, through online web conference, or over the telephone. I recorded the interviews by means of a digital recording device, or, in the case of the online web conference, using a computer program to record both audio and video. I transcribed the recordings into Transcriva software.

Data Analysis

The results of the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment were provided online to individual participants. Participants reported their top five talents at the beginning of the seminar.

I collected data from the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales using the fourteen-item scales. The Ryff Scales measure psychometric properties in dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. I analyzed data from the Ryff Scales using descriptive statistics comparing pre- and post-seminar results.

Data collected from the researcher-designed interview protocol was coded and grouped into core categories to determine which portions of the strengths-based ministry process were effective in elevating participants' sense of psychological well-being or happiness. I produced a chart, outlining the different response categories from the semi-structured interviews. I collated these responses into a narrative explanation of the results.

Generalizability

These results are generalizable from the context of Christ Church United Methodist to other churches, particularly those churches sharing the setting of a suburban, middle-class, primarily Anglo congregation. Almost all churches fitting this description have staff and various ministries overseen by staff but mostly depend on volunteers. In many church settings, leaders choose volunteers based on the needs of the ministry rather than the gifts, talents, and strengths of the individual Christ followers who serve there.

Theological Foundation

In order to equip laity for ministry, clergy need to develop a working understanding of human strengths and how they function as a central part of the identity of all people. Strengths are intimately intertwined with identity. Happiness and wholeness serve as two overarching goals of ministry as every person in the world desires happiness. A person may not understand what makes him or her happy. Many persons likely do not understand how to live in wholeness, but ministering to persons created in the image of God and loved intensely by God motivates clergy to discover how happiness and wholeness are developed and what the role of a strengths-discovery and implementation process offers people who are seeking a better life than is generally lived.

Paul writes that persons are God's handiwork, created for the purpose of doing good works (Eph. 2:10), implying that each person is a unique creation, the work of a Divine Artisan. The joyful and fulfilling life God intends for persons to experience includes the expression of this uniqueness in the good works God prepared for them to perform. Discovering strengths enables a person to live out their unique identity having been equipped for the particular works of ministry God calls them to carry out.

The life in which God calls people to live is an abundant life. Jesus stated in John 10:10 that his ministry's purpose was to offer life abundantly. Jesus intended, through the miracle of the Incarnation, to endow abundant life to humanity. Abundant life implies more than enough life. Abundant life overflows into superabundant life. Of course, the text assumes the life described as abundant must be worth possessing more than enough. Jesus purposes to give people abundant, meaningful, and fulfilling life. Certainly, Jesus

intends this life to be characterized by happiness, the kind of happiness anticipated by Wesley when he linked happiness and holiness:

> As the more holy we are upon earth the more happy we must be (seeing there is an inseparable connection between holiness and happiness); as the more good we do to others the more of present reward redounds into our own bosom. (2: 431)

Therefore, an inseparable link exists between happiness and holiness. The definition of holiness affects the understanding of happiness, according to Wesley's logic. For the purposes of this study holiness is defined less in the juridical terms and soteriological categories of justification and sanctification and more in the therapeutic and interpersonal terms of healing and wholeness. Holiness implies a wholeness of personhood as created in the image of God. Wesley underlines this therapeutic approach in his sermon "The One Thing Needful" when he claims the one needful thing persons must do is "to re-exchange the image of Satan for the image of God, bondage for freedom, sickness for health" (4: 355). Later in the sermon, he develops the therapeutic metaphor, writing "the one work we have to do is to return from gates of death to perfect soundness, to have our diseases cured, our wounds healed, and our uncleanness done away" (355). To live in holiness is to live out the reality of the fullness of the image of God, restored in humanity by the healing presence and power of the Holy Spirit as exhibited in the life of Jesus Christ. God restores the image, though marred by the Fall, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christ follower.

When persons, uniquely created in the image of God, engage in the good works God planned before time, they express the holiness that links perfectly with happiness. Christ followers who serve the ministry of the kingdom of God using their unique human strengths experience the happiness of fulfilling their created purpose. In essence, they live

in wholeness or holiness, thus happiness, the abundant life the Father sent Jesus to offer through the Holy Spirit.

From a theological perspective, strengths express the unique personhood individuals possess due to their creation in the image of God. A Trinitarian aspect of the image of God exists due to God existing in Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While humans are limited in their understanding of the inner workings of the Trinity because of the mystery associated with the doctrine, God's self-revelation in salvation history, individuals may enable persons to draw out some amazing insights into their own personhood because of the Trinity. Insights that illuminate anthropology primarily constitute the focus of this portion of the dissertation.

God is both personal and relational. To be a person is to be relational. To gain a more robust understanding of the Trinity, a person must grasp an ontology of relation. God is person in relation–Father to Son, Son to Father, Father to Spirit, and Son to Spirit. God is a community of relations. This Triune God moves out in the divine mission through the Incarnation and the sending of the Spirit. God makes himself known to people in this sending in the first place. The goal of God is to include the entirety of creation in relational love. Because God is love, to exist is to be a person. To be a person is to be in relationship with other persons. Love is the hallmark of relationship because the relationship freely expresses itself in love. Humanity is invited to join this relationship of love. The offer of relationship motivates the mission of God. The calling to utilize human strengths in relation to God, in the mission of God, is the primary calling of all human persons. The vocation of Abraham to be a blessing is the vocation of everyone responding to God's blessing.

Overview

In Chapter 2, I review the literature from positive psychology related to human strengths and literature related to strengths-based ministry. Chapter 3 contains the discussion of the design, research questions, population, data collection, variables, and data analysis. In Chapter 4, I explain the results of the study. Chapter 5 affords me the opportunity to draw conclusions from the data obtained and interpreted and to make several suggestions for churches that desire to promote the spiritual and psychological well-being of their members as well as to maximize ministry potential by tapping into the strengths of their people.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Introduction

Leaders apply the 80-20 rule, also known as the Pareto principle, across a wide variety of problems. From economics, to management theory, to education, and even church life, the Pareto principle goes a long way towards explaining how work is done and who does it (Koch 21-25). One of the ways it applies in the church, in addition to the theory that 80 percent of the giving is done by 20 percent of the people is the old adage that 80 percent of the ministry is accomplished by 20 percent of the members. If such a small minority of persons is engaged in the ongoing ministry of the local church, then the majority's motivation is suspect. Perhaps they are disobedient or have fallen prey to the prevailing consumer mentality. They may believe in the clergy-laity dichotomy that teaches ministry is the purview of the clergy alone. The situation of ministry being provided by only 20 percent of the people may be reflective of something more fundamental: that they do not understand that utilizing gifts and strengths in ministry leads to a fulfilling and deeply satisfying life. I believe all of these issues play an important role; however, I want to explore only one: that of equipping people for ministry by helping them discover their strengths in order to experience a happier, richer life, the abundant life God intends every Christian to experience.

The search for happiness continues to be one of the most deeply abiding realities of the human condition. From time immemorial philosophers, theologians, pastors, legislators, entertainers, and whole religions engaged in an often fruitless and ultimately unsatisfactory search for happiness. Socrates taught that the most fundamental human

desire is the desire for happiness. Human behavior and longing confirm Socrates' insight. Aristotle, building on Socrates' dictum, elevated happiness to the ultimate goal of human life and longing. He, along with other ancients, further postulated that the most effective means of obtaining happiness is the expression of virtue. Virtue, however, was not a guarantee of happiness because tragic events could befall the most virtuous person, destroying well-being and any hopes for a happy life (McMahon, *Happiness* 24-25, 44). Despite their best efforts and ingenious insights, the ancient Greeks displayed a limited understanding and expression of happiness, placing far more emphasis on outward circumstances and material well-being than later thinkers and the biblical witness. Happiness is more complex, consisting of an inner state of being that could overcome even the most *unhappy* of circumstances.

Notwithstanding this more positive outlook, particularly within the biblical material, Augustine maintained a highly pessimistic view about the prospects of a happy life on earth, teaching that happiness is a very limited possibility, granted only as a gift of grace, only at the point immediately before death, and only to a select few (McMahon, *Happiness* 105). Through the centuries, however, a vision of the prospect of enduring human happiness evolved. This vision leads to the current research, which sought to discover how persons utilize their God-given strengths to obtain and maintain psychological well-being, or happiness.

An inseparable link exists between happiness and holiness according to Wesley, Anglican priest and founder of the Methodist movement (2:431). Depending on how holiness is defined, various explanations of the connection might exist. For the purposes of this study, I define holiness, not in juridical terms of justification and sanctification,

but in the more therapeutic and interpersonal terms of healing and wholeness. The human ability to live a holy life has been marred by the Fall. People have inherited the sickness of sin from their parents. Holiness is experiencing healing by the Holy Spirit and living into the implications of being created in the *imago Dei*.

A link between holiness and happiness exists because of God's intention for the human person as revealed in the life of Jesus Christ whose stated purpose was to offer people abundant life (John 10:10). The very reason, the end, the purpose of the Incarnation is the endowing of abundant life onto humanity, the exact opposite of the intention of the thief, whose only desire is to destroy life. Abundant life is more than enough life; it is life overflowing, a superabundant life. The assumption can be made that the life God offers is worth possessing superabundantly. Jesus purposes to give people abundant, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. Certainly, Jesus intends the life he offers to be characterized by happiness, the kind of happiness anticipated by Wesley when he connected happiness and holiness.

Equipping people for ministry through an intentional process of strengths discovery and development, resulting in happier, more fulfilling lives was the intention of the current project. Recent progress in psychology offers hope in understanding the mechanics of how human happiness evolves and how people maintain a sense of fulfillment and meaning in life. A whole new branch of psychology, identified as positive psychology, offers hopeful answers to some of the more difficult questions of how happiness is experienced in an ongoing manner. According to researchers in positive psychology, happiness is achieved and maintained by optimizing three distinct processes:

1. Cultivating deep attachment and commitment in key relationships,

2. Participating in work and leisure activities in which unique human strengths are exercised, and

3. Cultivating an optimistic perspective on life that is future oriented (Carr 348).

The current study focused on the second means: employing the unique human strengths each person possesses in work and leisure activities. According to positive psychologists, leisure activities include hobbies and volunteer work. The framework of this study involved persons engaging their strengths in ministry activities. Psychologists offer two justifications for focusing in on the utilization of strengths. First, ample material is available for assessing human strengths that is of a practical nature and useable by local churches for empowering people for ministry. Second, strengths are closely associated with the uniqueness of each individual person as created in the image of God.

In the emerging field of study of human strengths, a single, universally adopted definition has proven elusive. Psychologists generally take the opposite approach from examining strengths. These professionals are much more accustomed to studying human deficiency (Aspinwall and Staudinger10). Seligman, the father of the scientific discipline of positive psychology, defines a strength as a human characteristic that is inherently valued and is measurable and ubiquitous across cultures (*Authentic Happiness* 137). Linley and Harrington define strength as the capacity for thinking and behaving in a manner that enables optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes (39). In general, positive psychologists consider strengths within the context of observed and measured human personality traits (Aspinwall and Staudinger11-12). Donald Clifton, an early pioneer in the area of strengths studies and a partner with the Gallup Organization

in the development of the StrengthsFinder® assessment tool, understands strengths as talents that have been developed by learning associated knowledge and skills that enable consistent, near-perfect performance in a set of activities or tasks (Rettew and Lopez 3). When a person actively engages his or her unique set of strengths, they are much more likely to experience positive feelings over a sustained time, contributing to the experience of a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

A human strengths-based approach to the ministry of the whole people of God recognizes that strengths are gifts from God, contrasted to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12). Strengths may be understood by what Reginald Johnson refers to as "creation gifts." Creation gifts, juxtaposed to "New Creation" gifts, are innate components of human personality (34). God built these characteristics, traits, talents, and strengths into each person and intends them for ministry use.

This approach, assisting people to discover and utilize their gifts in the life of the church, will increase ministry participation and the sense of happiness of people engaged in ministry. Most are not aware of their unique strengths and are thus not deploying them in ministry. A growing awareness of strengths encourages followers of Jesus to join God, through a vital relationship with God in the power of the Spirit, in the mission of redeeming the world. When followers of Jesus deploy their strengths, they experience a higher level of life satisfaction and happiness due to the fact that they are living in obedience to God's design for their lives, and then they will be engaged in activities that tap into their God-given potential and experience the abundant life Jesus came to offer.

Philosophical Framework

An even more fundamental problem exists than the lack of equipping people for ministry. Part of that problem lies in the unfortunate split between the roles of clergy and laity, with clergy understood as the primary producers of ministry and laity as consumers of ministry that they financially support. However, the more fundamental predicament to which that problem contributes is the general lack of fulfillment and happiness experienced by people, even in the church. Bertrand Russell, the mid-twentieth-century philosopher and rather ardent atheist, presents an early example of a self-help book before the self-help section rose to such a prominence in bookstores. He makes an insightful observation, noting that people, living life as it is generally lived, are unhappy (13). The irony of his insight is not so much in his prescription for a cure for the general unhappiness of humanity but in his diagnosis of the major contributor to unhappiness: a preoccupation with the self (17). While Russell finds religious faith of all stripes to be unattractive, the irony is that part of the solution is indeed a process of self-discovery, of persons embracing the reality of their giftedness as a persons created in the image of God. This self-discovery leads to an ability to shift focus from the self onto service, enabling and empowering happiness and wholeness. Russell categorizes this lack of happiness as almost tragic in scope because animals experience *happiness* as long as their basic needs of physical health are met. In the advanced civilization in which Russell was living and writing, the basic needs of the vast majority were met, but people remained ever so unhappy and discontented. Russell's prescription is wide and varying, but his advice seems to share some commonalities with positive psychology. Russell and positive psychologists point to the quality of close relationships, flow experiences in work and

play, and important outward circumstances as significant in governing psychological well-being.

Not only modern philosophers delve into what does and does not make for happiness. This question reaches all the way back to the beginning of human reflective thinking. Socrates claims that prudent behavior results in happiness (*eudaimonia*), and imprudent, or foolish, behavior results in unhappiness (Plato, *Protagoras* 119; Plato, *Meno* 35). Aristotle took the discussion to a significantly deeper level that is still debated today. He begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the bold statement that all human behavior is teleological; it is aimed at some ultimate end. The end to which all human behavior aims is happiness (*eudaimonia*). Ian Johnston claims that the translation of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is problematic. This word has a wider meaning than when modern Americans speak of happiness. *Eudaimonia* is not limited to a simple emotional state of being but has more to do with "well-being" or "living well" (7). Martha C. Nussbaum also argues for a much more robust view of *eudaimonia*, actually eschewing the English translation *happiness*. She understands Aristotle's intent as describing a human being living a good life, or human flourishing, which includes both living well and doing well. She states that for most of Aristotle's Greek readers, *eudaimonia* would have meant something essentially active, in which the praiseworthy activities actually constitute *eudaimonia* itself, rather than just lead to it (6). N. T. Wright wants to do away with the Aristotelian concept of happiness altogether and replace it with the biblical Greek *makarios*, *blessed*, as in the statements of blessing Jesus pronounced in Matthew 5, commonly referred to as the Beatitudes, and the Hebrew words *ashre* and *baruch* (103). I discuss this reading of Aristotle later during the theological section on happiness.

Throughout history, philosophers, theologians, and others posit a variety of meanings for *eudaimonia*: happiness, self-actualization, the blessed life, and an almost impossible life where divine and human attributes collide. Johnston argues that *eudaimonia* "includes a sense of material, psychological, and physical well-being over time" (7). Today, positive psychologists pick up on this particular sense of the meaning of *eudaimonia* in their discussion of happiness. They use terms such as "subjective well-being" (Biswas-Diener, Diener, and Tamir 19), "full life," consisting of "the Pleasant Life, the Good Life, and the Meaningful Life" (Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* 249), and being "contented" (Wilson 13). Carol D. Ryff and Burton H. Singer describe the term as "psychological well-being," a complex human experience that includes six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy (19-23). Many philosophers, historians, and translators simply use "happiness" (Broadie; Gurtler; Kenny; McMahon, *Happiness*; Nussbaum).

Darrin M. McMahon defines *eudaimonia*:

> one of a constellation of closely related terms that includes *eutychia* (luck), *olbios* (blessed; favored), and *makarios* (blessed, happy, blissful). In some ways encompassing the meaning of all of these terms, *eudaimonia* (happy) literally signifies "good spirit" or "good god." From *eu*=good and *daimon*=demon/spirit. ("From the Happiness" 7)

According to David L. Norton, *daimon* is a person's "normative potential to individuated character and is inborn, subsisting from birth as innate potentiality" (21). In this sense, experiencing *eudaimonia* is to live up to their full potential, an inherent and inborn potential. From a Christian perspective, this potential is God-given, perhaps part of the *imago Dei*. Thomas Merton makes an important contribution to understanding this human

potential in his distinction between the true and false selves. Merton understands the true self as the real self, the self who is created in the image of God. This true self exists in order to experience the fullness of God in temporal and eternal life. For Merton, "to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self" (*New Seeds* 31). Perhaps the primary cause of unhappiness in people is their failing to understand their true identity as children of God, thus failing to live as the people God created them to be. To live as the false self is to choose to become lost in the attempt to be who the world wants one to be. Obviously, not everyone understands this reality and the ends pursued led to less-than-ideal outcomes.

As stated previously, all human action is teleological. If this belief is true, then it has important ramifications for ministry. Aristotle argues that persons intend each and every action to result in some good and that all goods combined ultimately aim toward the greatest possible good. That greatest possible good, to which all other goods point and at which all actions aim, is happiness (*eudaimonia*). Therefore, persons perform each and every action with the goal that this activity will increase the possibility that they experience happiness, contentment, and well-being.

The very act of reading this dissertation is wrought with purpose and teleological aims. Readers believe that because read it, they will be closer to fulfillment in life, to happiness, to what Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*. They do not necessarily have to believe that in these pages lies the secret to happiness, but that through this reading, through fulfilling some responsibility they may have (i.e., serving as a mentor, serving as a reader on a dissertation reading team, reading for pleasure), whatever the immediate motivation,

a deeper motivation draws them through these sentences that they believe is going to result in a greater degree of life satisfaction. They might stop and think, “He must be crazy! This is a chore!” The reading might be laborious and a major sacrifice, but people attempt even unpleasant tasks in order to reach a higher goal. Everyone aims for this ultimate goal: happiness.

Everything in life fits this pattern. People undertake even *foolish* or *imprudent* things (they might not necessarily be understood as foolish or imprudent at the time) in order to produce a greater degree of happiness. Someone may choose to watch a film. They might believe they need a relaxing break from a busy schedule. Having seen a trailer for a new film that seems appealing, he decides to make a date with his wife to see the film. Several levels of motivation move a person to such an activity. First, a desire for an escape exists. Second, time to spend nurturing a significant relationship motivates. The film may be good, bad, or indifferent. Whether it is any of these things is unimportant, but his evaluation of the film is that at the very least it will be a relaxing escape from everyday stresses. He enters the theater, undertaking an action that on at least two levels one believes will lead to a greater degree of happiness. It will provide some needed relaxation and a shared experience with one’s wife. People run every activity through this teleological filter: “Will this further my goal of being a happy, contented, and fulfilled person?” The film may or may not accomplish these expectations. It might be horrible. It might actually interfere with his desire to live a virtuous life by making sin more attractive. He and his wife argue about whether or not to purchase popcorn, thus ruining the evening. By contrast, the experience might be wonderfully uplifting, connecting the him with himself at a deeper level and drawing the him into

greater intimacy with his wife. Art of any media may evince a variety of effects. The result, though relevant to the actual experience of happiness is not relevant to the desire for seeing said film. People view films under those particular circumstances because of their belief that those experiences will make them happier. Being happier is the motivation for everything people do, whether they reflect on motivations or not, or are even vaguely aware of their motivations. Every activity is teleological. People desire to achieve the ultimate end, happiness.

Some may and will disagree. They may say, "Oh, but what really motivates me is pleasing God." They may surmise, "I am aiming at eternal life; that is my ultimate goal." I would agree with the understanding that the reason one person wants to please God and the reason another wants to experience eternal life is that they believe these goals will lead to fulfillment in life, or happiness. Happiness is the ultimate of all human goals. Aristotle was correct. Happiness is, indeed, the ultimate goal God has for each person. The heavenly Father's desire is for his creatures is happiness. He sent Jesus, and Jesus stated that his purpose in coming was to give people abundant life (John 10:10). I want to delve more deeply into what abundant life encompasses later, but an abundant life is a happy life. It is a life of ultimate blessedness, of love, joy, and peace. God uses this deep human motivation for happiness to inspire and encourage people to undertake activities that lead to happiness and facilitate the happiness of others.

Some may inquire as to why humans are capable of bringing about so much suffering upon themselves if the goal is happiness. This question is an enduring and important one. Even those who seem consistently to engage in activities that almost guarantee their own unhappiness *believe*, at the time, those activities will produce

happiness. The problem is their belief in those particular activities. I am not arguing that all people experience happiness or that they even think about happiness in any conscious manner, although most seem to do so. However, everyone is aiming for happiness and everyone believes, falsely or not, that their chosen activities will increase the likelihood of their happiness. Take, for instance, the heroin addicts. They know, on some level, at least, that injecting heroin into a vein leads to death, but they choose to do so, regardless, because of a deeper drive, the drive for happiness. Either the pain they experience in life is so great and they hope to escape it, leading to happiness of at least a temporary sort, or the fear of withdrawal symptoms is so great that the only happiness they desire is the immediate relief from potentially negative experiences. Alternatively, they may simply want to experience the high, which they perceive as a temporary escape into happiness. Happiness as an ultimate goal is still an active pursuit, but people push it into the background as an immediate felt need takes precedence. The teleological nature of the activity is intact, even though the aspiration remains utterly illogical and hopeless.

Heroin addiction is an extreme example, but any state of being that displaces the fulfillment of the ultimate goal is equally illogical. Materialism is a primary motivation for the rampant consumerism that exists in American culture. Many wrongly believe they obtain the *telos*, happiness, through the consumption and/or accumulation of material things. People want something Madison Avenue promotes, so they act in certain ways to be able to obtain that material thing. They hope that either the acquisition of this thing results in happiness through using the object or the increased prestige they believe accompanies ownership of it brings happiness. However, as has been demonstrated repeatedly, the acquisition of material objects is impotent in providing lasting happiness.

The fallen nature of humanity, however, continuously produces conflict, strife, and even death in the pursuit of the material, though materialism never makes anyone lastingly happy. Fundamental beliefs and values betray people again. They strive and work for that which does not last, believing ever so strongly it will, and that it will produce contentment and well-being, but it does not. However, they keep trying. This kind of behavior is universal and universally fails. However, the goal remains the same and the means for obtaining that goal remains the same. People desire, above all other things, to be happy but seem to be helpless in actually experiencing it. As Russell aptly observes, life, as it is generally lived, leads to the opposite of happiness. The Bible is clear: "The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (Prov. 19:21, NRSV). People tend to wreck their opportunities for happiness by engaging in activities that guarantee the opposite.

Not only do people engage in actions they believe will make them happy, but do not, but they also fail to engage in the very activities that can bolster their experience of happiness. Ministry activities that engage personal strengths are examples within the context of this project. A variety of reasons exists as to why people fail to participate in ministry using their strengths, which has the potential to increase their experiences of happiness or psychological well-being. People believe in a false dichotomy between clergy and laity. Some people are simply lazy. Others are distracted from a service mentality due to self-centeredness and the consumer culture that pervades much of the society, including church. Jesus said that those who attempt to save their lives will lose them, but whoever lays down one's life for others will find it and discover true life (Mark 8:35).

I argue that the reason people engage in self-destructive activities is a basic lack of self-knowledge or self-awareness. If persons truly know themselves, they know that experiencing happiness comes from being the best selves they can be, the selves who are created in the image of God. People have always engaged in self-destructive behaviors, falsely believing those behaviors lead to happiness. They adopted this pattern at the Fall and continue to follow it. Adam and Eve tragically, but genuinely, believed eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would make them happy. Instead, their action resulted in the opposite effect. What people think will make them happy oftentimes makes them miserable, but they keep doing it anyway because their value system and fundamental beliefs about the world, how life works, and their core identity betray them. Even though Aristotle was right in stating that all human activity is teleological, and that *telos* to which all activity ultimately aims is happiness, people still engage in activities that undermine their desire for happiness; likewise, they fail to engage in healthy activities that potentially lead to happiness.

Aristotle not only argued that all human action is teleological, aimed at happiness, but that "happiness is at once the pleasantest and the fairest and best of all things whatever" (*Eudemian Ethics* 1: 1214a). In essence, humans can aim at no greater good than the good of happiness. If the abundant life includes holiness, according to Scripture, then I am apt to believe Aristotle was correct. Happiness, the abundant life, the blessed life, the life animated and shaped by Christ in the power of his resurrection is the highest life possible and the life to which this project aimed at encouraging people to live.

Insight into whether or not the *eudaimonia*, or happiness, of Aristotle is congruent with the highest aims of the Christian life may be found in Aristotle's emphasis on virtue.

Not having the benefit of the revealed truth of Scripture, he is not a perfect source when discussing virtue; however, a moral foundation and quality undergirds Aristotle's concept of happiness.

Aristotle emphasizes the importance of educating the feelings, knowing that most people experience fleeting feelings and much of the time those feelings are dependent on outward circumstances. He encourages an education in virtue. People must train themselves in order to be more naturally inclined to carry out virtuous activities, thus leading to happiness (Johnston 15). However, maintaining a distinction between virtue and happiness is helpful. Happiness is dependent on virtue, but not vice versa. People can be both virtuous and unhappy. He does not equate the two (Kenny 101). Seligman makes a distinction between meaningful, good, and pleasant lives. Happiness is composed of all three, and each is dependent on the next. However, one could experience the pleasant life, lack virtue, and never attain good or meaningful lives, thus missing happiness along the way ("Can Happiness" 84). Therefore, Aristotle advocates training humans in cultivating virtues to the end that the practice of those virtues leads to happiness.

Wright advocates training the people of God in the Christian virtues. He criticizes Aristotle's idea that the goal of life is *eudaimonia*, suggesting a higher goal to pursue is blessedness (103). In making his argument, he follows a similar path to Aristotle's. Wright refutes the idea that after persons are *saved* all they need do is wait around to die and go to heaven. Wright argues that after believing, people must accomplish much work. Wright claims in order for persons to be truly human, the humans God created them to be, they need to shape their character by the habitual practice of the Christian virtues. Jesus not only introduced a new way of being human in the world, but he transformed the

very best of human wisdom (25). I tend to agree with Wright and want to examine what the Bible says about happiness and its relationship to blessedness.

The Heavenly Father's desire is for people's happiness. He sent Jesus and Jesus stated that his purpose in coming was to give abundant life (John 10:10). It is a life of ultimate blessedness, of love, joy, and peace. God uses this deep human motivation for happiness to inspire and encourage people to do the things in life that lead to happiness and to facilitate the happiness of others.

The Word of God proclaims, "The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (Prov. 19:21). Humans, no doubt, make plans that are utterly inconsistent with God's purpose. People lack the knowledge (renewal of the mind) and the spiritual inspiration to grasp that God desires their very best. Humans sin against God, others, and, ultimately, against themselves, guaranteeing their unhappiness and contributing to the unhappiness of others. However, the motivation is the same. Sin tempts people so strongly because it promises happiness. Sin, however, always delivers the opposite.

From the beginning of time, philosophers have searched for answers to those most basic of all human questions, "How can life be satisfying? How can people be happy?" In asking the questions and using their God-given intellect, they laid a solid foundation for understanding the human search for happiness. Even though their conclusions may not be fully consistent with ultimate reality, their thinking continues to aid humanity in grasping a healthy approach to ultimate goals.

Psychological Framework

The search for happiness continues today, and practitioners of a new branch of psychology pick up where philosophers left off and attempt to determine, from a scientific standpoint, the meaning of being happy and how people achieve happiness.

Happiness in Positive Psychology

Although many consider Seligman as the father of positive psychology, others came before him, most notably Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi with his groundbreaking work on flow experiences. The movement is young, as far as science goes, but its practitioners consistently gain ground, in both respectability and research (M. Martin 89). Seligman argues that psychology had largely become focused on disease and how best to heal people with psychological ills. This almost universal focus on pathology and how to aid the afflicted in attaining normalcy left a void in psychology's understanding of humanity. Instead of studying only what can go wrong, scientists began investigating optimal human functioning and how *normal* people might rise above *normal* and experience psychological well-being. Thus, the study of positive psychology began (Peterson and Seligman 5). Positive psychology attempts to help people build positive emotions into their lives, maximize their strengths, and discover and live lives of meaning (Seligman, "Can Happiness" 80). The aim of positive psychology is to study, understand, and encourage the conditions and practices that lead to optimal human functioning and flourishing. The label for this human flourishing is psychological well-being, also known as happiness (Carr 1; Gable and Haidt 103). Happiness is a controversial word, particularly in the Christian setting where a real bias exists against the term and a suspicion that anyone advocating happiness as part of the Christian life somehow

cheapens grace and waters down the gospel. A fundamental misunderstanding of happiness and the confusion of happiness with fleeting feelings of glee give rise to these objections.

In his text summarizing the findings of positive psychology, Alan Carr posits three areas of life in which people must function well to experience happiness. The first is the arena of relationships. People need healthy, committed relationships in which they experience deep attachment. The second involves day-to-day activities in which they engage, whether at work or leisure. These activities must incorporate their talents, strengths, and interests. Carr identifies a third area, their outlook on life. For them to experience happiness, they need to be both optimistic and future oriented (348). Ryff, in her extensive research in the field, identifies six dimensions of psychological well-being: (1) self-acceptance, (2) positive relations with others, (3) personal growth, (4) purpose in life, (5) environmental mastery, and (6) autonomy (Ryff and Singer 20-23).

Ryff's dimensions are particularly helpful for understanding what leads to happiness. Self-acceptance is critical because if individuals do not accept themselves, obtaining happiness will be impossible. Possessing a positive attitude toward self and a sense of acceptance about both good and bad personal qualities are important. Positive relations with others serve as a near universal indicator of happiness. Experiencing healthy, warm, trusting, and satisfying relationships is key. People who are concerned about the welfare of others, able to show appropriate affection, intimacy, and empathy are more likely to be psychologically well. Those who have a feeling of continued development and who understand themselves as growing and are open to new experiences, encounter personal growth. They are able to understand and elucidate ways

in which they have changed over time. Purpose in life is experienced by persons who have a sense of directedness toward goals in life. They believe life has meaning now and that up to this point life has been meaningful. Persons with a strong purpose in life have goals and objectives toward which to work in the present and future. Ryff's concept of purpose in life is similar to Carr's idea of an optimistic outlook. Environmental mastery proves more complex. It is the sense that individuals are comfortable in the environment in which they find themselves or that they have been free in choosing their environment. These persons are able to make effective use of their surrounding contexts and have some sense of control over the external world. Autonomy is indicative of persons who are independent and self-determining. They are their own persons, able to resist pressure from others to act in certain ways. They are self-regulating (Ryff, "Happiness" 1072). Ryff's autonomous self is similar to Bowen's differentiated self, someone not bound and driven by relationships with others. However, he or she is free to enjoy relationships with others. A self-differentiated person is secure in his or her true self, independent of the praise or criticism of others (Kerr and Bowen 102-07). A connection exists between these psychological categories and Merton's concept of the true self as opposed to the false self. Merton argues for the existence of a false self born out of fallenness and sin. He encourages people to be their true selves, the selves created by God. He states, "The problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self" (*New Seeds* 31-34). Knowing this true self, this autonomous, differentiated self, plays a key role in self-acceptance, and, therefore, happiness.

Most of the literature points to variances in happiness from an idyllic, yet not well-defined *normal* state. No widely accepted method or measurement is available to

label someone as happy or unhappy. Happiness and unhappiness exist in degrees. Ryff uses the six dimensions as indicators that if individuals score well in all six areas, they are most likely happy. At least, they are happier and more psychologically well than those who score lower. Carr, after his distillation of the literature, concludes that persons wanting to pursue greater happiness need to enhance their close relationships, discover and engage their strengths in everyday activities, and develop a greater degree of optimism about the future. In so doing they more likely will grow happier. Seligman in his book *Authentic Happiness* encourages people to strive for what he calls the "full life" by focusing more on lasting gratifications than fleeting pleasures (248-49). None of the researchers point to a magic pill for experiencing happiness or even determining exactly what happiness, ultimately, is. The historian, McMahon, argues that the attempt to define a *normal* or set point for human happiness is precarious, as the temptation will be to set it ever higher, placing happiness out of the range of the ability of most people to experience (*Happiness* 479). Determining the true nature of happiness lies beyond science and belongs more in the ethereal, spiritual, and philosophical realm. I do believe the Bible has much to say about seeking happiness and how best to obtain it and that it has to do with discovering the true self and living in congruence to that identity, as one who is created in the image of God in relationship with others who are also created in the image of God. Following a discussion of what most positive psychologists agree is one of the important factors in self-awareness and increasing psychological well-being, the engagement of human virtues, talents, and strengths, I consider a biblical and theological understanding of happiness.

Human Virtues, Talents, and Strengths

Defining human strength from a psychological point of view is challenging, perhaps not as challenging as defining happiness, but still challenging. Throughout the history of psychology, practitioners focused almost exclusively on a psychology of abnormality or deficiency. Researchers preferred to define human deficiency because, when doing so, one moves in the direction of the normal state. Pathology is defined over and against normalcy. Human strength presents more difficulty because instead of looking at psychological change toward a previously normal level of functioning, one is theoretically moving beyond a *norm* toward a higher than normal level of functioning. Practically speaking, because psychologists historically focused on abnormality and unhappiness, they spent less time and energy studying optimal functioning, thus learning less about psychological well-being (Aspinwall and Staudinger 10).

Donald O. Clifton, a psychologist whose business, Selection Research, Incorporated, later acquired the Gallup Organization, began to identify persons' personal talents employed in their careers for successful and effective performance. He identified talents utilizing empirically based semi-structured interviews (Rettew and Lopez 3). From these interviews, he identified around four hundred different talent themes, thirty-four of which are prevalent in society, that people generally associate with success. He then developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment tool, consisting of 178-item pairs designed to measure those thirty-four prevalent talent themes (4). Persons develop talents into strengths by combing them with associated knowledge, skills, and effort (8). Clifton defined strength as "consistent near perfect performance in an activity" (Buckingham and Clifton 25). Clifton's definition represents a functional approach that

focuses primarily on performance; however, the underlying talent facilitates the performance, repeatedly enabling excellence in the activity. The individual carries out the activity itself for its intrinsic value (26).

Clifton's thought is similar to that of Peter F. Drucker, one of the premier twentieth-century business management theoreticians, who recognizes the need for leaders in organizations to focus on the strengths of their workers rather than on their weaknesses. Weaknesses, in Drucker's theory, do not even warrant recognition; rather, they are to be rendered irrelevant by a concentrated effort to build on and work from strengths. He argues that the well-rounded person, a person who is proficient in many things, does not exist. He bases his managerial method on capitalizing on the strengths of each person and ensuring the employment of their areas of strength. If an executive spends time, energy, and money attempting to fix weaknesses, he or she utterly wastes resources. Drucker claims, "Strong people always have strong weaknesses too" (71-72, 87). Interestingly, he references the parable of the talents, claiming the Bible teaches this same principle (99). I examine this parable later.

Seligman coalesced the positive psychology movement. His inspiration came from the work of Clifton and the Gallup Organization. Seligman grounds his notion of strengths in his understanding of six ubiquitous virtues discovered across what he refers to as the "big three" cultures: China, South Asia (mostly India), and the West. The major religious and philosophical systems of the world endorse these virtues, according to Seligman. The positive psychology virtues include wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (*Authentic Happiness* 130-33; Peterson and Seligman 33-34, 40-52). Although he did not necessarily utilize his training as a psychologist to

develop the list, he does use his psychologist's skills in measuring the virtues in people today (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Virtues and Associated Strengths

Virtues	Associated Strengths
Wisdom/Knowledge	Creativity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
Courage	Bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality
Humanity	Love, kindness, social intelligence
Justice	Citizenship, fairness, leadership
Temperance	Forgiveness/mercy, humility/modesty, prudence, moderation, self-regulation
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

Source: Peterson and Seligman 56-57.

Seligman defines human strength as something that is measurable and acquirable, a "psychological characteristic that can be seen across different situations and over time" (*Authentic Happiness* 137). Strengths are intrinsically valuable not only because of the results they facilitate but also because of the enjoyment experienced simply by their exercise. He identifies twenty-four strengths uniquely associated with one of the six virtues. Seligman claims his list is a work in progress, and he readily admits it is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. However, he expects future research in the field of positive psychology to yield an exclusive and exhaustive understanding of human strengths (Haidt 169; Peterson and Seligman 13).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is an online assessment tool that measures potential personal strengths. This instrument was used in the current study. Clifton defines strength as "consistent near perfect performance in an activity" (Buckingham and Clifton 25). They based this definition on an understanding of a strength as an extension and

development of talent. A strength is a talent plus knowledge associated with that talent and skills learned in order to hone the talent. When talent, knowledge, and skills are combined with effort, they work together to provide the desired performance in a particular activity (Rettew and Lopez 8). Clifton identified these personal talent themes, utilizing semi-structured, empirically based interviews with hundreds of people (3). From these interviews, he identified around four hundred talent themes, thirty-four of which he determined were prevalent and generally associated with life success, particularly within a work environment (4). Due to Clifton's work in the field of human resources and his later association with the Gallup Organization and their initial efforts serving Fortune 500 companies, they chose to focus mostly on career, although much of the literature they produce today includes application to ministry, volunteerism, and family (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Gallup's Talent Themes

Category	Talent Themes
Executing	Achiever, arranger, belief, consistency, deliberative, focus, responsibility, restorative
Influencing	Activator, command, communication, competition, maximizer, self-assurance, significance, woo
Relationship building	Adaptability, developer, connectedness, empathy, harmony, includer, individualization, positivity, relator
Strategic thinking	Analytical, context, futuristic, ideation, input, intellection, learner, strategic

Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman distinguish among what they refer to as "core virtues," "character strengths," and "situational themes." A core virtue is one of the six ubiquitous virtues identified in Table 2.1. These are "the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers" across time and varying cultures (13). Character strengths "are the psychological ingredients … that

define the virtues" (13). Exercising a character strength is a function of virtue and contributes to the development of a virtue in a person's life. Situational themes are different from character strengths, according to Peterson and Seligman. Situational themes are "the specific habits that lead people to manifest given character strengths in given situations" (14). The Gallup Organization uses this concept of strength because of their career context. The thirty-four themes found in Gallup's published books are specific to the contemporary American workplace, further limiting their application, according to Peterson and Seligman (14). However, they argue that taken on a more abstract level, Clifton's "situational themes" may be understood as closely related to Seligman's character strengths and, thus, his virtues (14).

The most helpful expert definition of strengths, from a psychological standpoint, comes from Linley and Harrington. They write that a strength is "a natural capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes" (39). The focus on capacity is particularly insightful. A strength or, more precisely, a potential strength has to do with a psychological capacity, a potentiality. I believe this psychological capacity is innate and related to the unique personhood inherent in God's creation of human beings in his image. I explore this possibility later in the biblical and theological section. A strength enables excellent functioning in areas that, because of their relationship to human virtues, are inherently valuable outcomes. Strengths are appreciated because they are, in and of themselves, valuable, apart from anything they may actually accomplish, except to say they produce optimal functioning. This functioning is optimal because it is consistently excellent.

Human strengths play an important role in understanding the concept of flow, developed by Csikszentmihalyi, one of the chief pioneers in the field of positive psychology. Flow is his term, now widely adopted, that describes the mental state persons enter during the time they actually work in areas of their talents and strengths. Upon entering flow, persons experience immediate feedback from tasks at hand that leads to a fading of awareness of anxieties for the duration of the tasks. Concern for self disappears during flow but a stronger sense of self emerges following the flow experience. Persons who enter flow also report a loss of sense of time duration during the experience. Generally, this time-altering sensation results in lengthy sessions of activity, feeling as if they transpired over a much shorter period. The more time individuals spend experiencing flow, the greater their sense of overall psychological well-being (49).

An obvious application for utilizing strengths exists in the workplace. Work is a nearly universal experience, and the activities in which persons engage at work have a major impact on individuals' sense of contentment and happiness (144). However, flow is also important when considering leisure time. Robert E. Park, noted American sociologist writes, "It is in the improvident use of our leisure, I suspect, that the greatest wastes of American life occur" (118). Leisure time is often unstructured and unchallenging. Thus, many persons sense greater degrees of life satisfaction at work than at leisure. One of the challenges of positive psychology lies in addressing the use of leisure time, which many people consider to be rest time. However, in order for flow to occur, an activity must task strengths and be challenging but feasible (Csikszentmihalyi 157-63).

Churches often make a fatal error concerning flow experience. They almost guarantee people avoid flow in ministry tasks when they attempt to make ministry

activities more accessible by making them simple and easy. If a task is too easy, even if engaging an area of strength, little sense of accomplishment and satisfaction results. Churches must steer ministry tasks toward strengths so Christians can work more consistently in the manner in which God created them. Ministry tasks need to offer sufficient challenge and meaning for persons to remain engaged, producing the largest possible flow experiences.

Churches, also at times, denigrate work. I heard an associate pastor at a megachurch state that what Christians do at work is their job, contrasted to what they do in ministry, which is their calling. However, only one calling exists—to be a follower of Jesus Christ. I argue later that this singular calling includes the call to ministry because part of being a follower of Christ is being equipped for works of ministry. If the logic is followed that Christians' work does not include their calling or ministry, then the implication is that most people spend most of their waking hours undertaking useless activity as far as the kingdom of God is concerned. I cannot imagine God would encourage this way of thinking about our use of time. Indeed, the work he prescribed for Adam, tending the garden, was given prior to the Fall. Work, itself, is part of God's creative activity that he desires people to do. Ministry can and should encompass a person's career. Church leaders may play an important role in the discernment process, helping members discern how God formed them and to what God calls them to be and do in ministry and career in order to make the most significant impact for God's kingdom. Pursuing this end, the people of God experience the abundant life of joy and happiness God intends.

Biblical and Theological Framework

A solid biblical and theological foundation sheds light on the philosophical and psychological findings concerning psychological well-being, happiness, and strengths. Humans universally search for and attempt to experience happiness because God created humans to be happy and whole. Humans fail in their search because they generally do not pursue happiness according to God's plan. God intends happiness to be enjoyed by all. Jesus claimed that one of his purposes for appearing was so that God's people might have abundant life (John 10:10). The abundant life must no doubt be a happy life. If not, then God would desire his children experience an abundance of a misery in life, or at the very least a mediocre life. This idea is inconsistent with the revelation of God's character found throughout the Scripture. The very fact that God created humans in his image (Gen. 1:26-27) reveals the relational nature and uniqueness of individual human persons. God creates persons in his image and endows them with personality, gifts, and talents, which are potential strengths.

As philosophy, theology, and psychology have matured, scholars connected the Greek philosophical notion of *eudaimonia*, positive psychology's subjective well-being, and the theological and biblical notion of happiness. Byzantine philosophers made the first connection, followed by Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages. Some modern scholars argue, erroneously I believe, that Aquinas simply Christianized Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. According to Antonio Donato, interpreters of Aristotle assert the only real difference between Aquinas and Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* lies in Aquinas' thoughts on perfect versus imperfect happiness, making Aquinas essentially an Aristotelian (174). However, Donato argues for a much more nuanced reading of

Aquinas, stating that Aquinas actually built on Aristotle, expanding several philosophical traditions rather than simply adapting the Aristotelian stream to a Christian worldview (161-62). Aquinas depended heavily on Neo-Platonists Michael of Ephesus and Eustratius of Nicaea (both twelfth century). From Michael of Ephesus, he borrowed the distinction between perfect and imperfect happiness. Michael proposed a conception of imperfect happiness, similar to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* in that it was always at the mercy of fate or the turn of fortune or misfortune, thus, its imperfection, due to its uncertainty. Various philosophers struggled with this notion of the uncertainty of *eudaimonia*. Seeing it lost at the hand of fate seemed somehow unfair and thus nearly immoral (180-84). Nussbaum indicates Aristotle argued that chance, bad luck, or misfortune could reverse the ethical praiseworthiness of a life. Aristotle's position seemed troubling to some, so they read Aristotle through the lens of Kant, and this lens has influenced the interpretation of Aristotle on this point. The Kantian view postulates that misfortune cannot alter the ethical praiseworthiness of excellent character and behavior (329).

Eustratius, commenting on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues that persons encounter perfect happiness only in the vision of God (Donato 184). Aquinas refined Michael and Eustratius' thought into his *felicitas* and *beatitudo*, imperfect and perfect happiness, respectively. A person could achieve *felicitas* while living on earth, but this experience was possible only for those who led lives of virtue, as defined by Aristotle, plus the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity. *Beatitudo* was possible only in heaven (Bok 1206).

Interestingly enough, part of the confusion arises from another Aristotelian term altered by Christian thought, *theoria* (contemplation). Aristotle understood *theoria* as the

highest and happiest activity for humans, moving them toward the supreme end of human life. He believed *eudaimonia* was the ultimate goal to which the ultimate activity led. Aristotle's *theoria* included reflection on the divine and on the truths discovered by the theoretical sciences (Donato 163, 167-68). Similar to the dichotomy between perfect and imperfect happiness, Aquinas distinguished between perfect and imperfect contemplation. Aquinas taught that the object of contemplation must be the noblest possible entity about which people can think—God (168). Unfortunately, however, Aquinas surmised that perfect contemplation exists only in the afterlife, just as persons can only experience perfect happiness after death (170).

Aquinas followed the lead of many generations of Christians, reaching back to the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers. Unlike Aristotle, they understood *theoria* as a uniquely spiritual activity with a specifically Christian goal, union with Christ. Aristotle, though in agreement that the divine life could be the object of *theoria*, added contemplation of the discoveries of intellectual pursuit. Aristotle's ideal life consisted of *philosophia*, whereas the monks of the desert pursued an alternative ideal, the goal (*skopos*) of purity of heart so one might attain the end (*telos*), the kingdom of God (Cassian 41). John Cassian wrote in the early AD fifth century, drawing on an earlier desert fathers and mothers' tradition.

Wesley, the eighteenth-century Anglican revivalist who is perhaps most noted for his emphasis on holiness of heart and life, stated that an "inseparable" connection exists between holiness and happiness (2: 431). Albert C. Outler, noted Wesleyan historian, claims Wesley was a "eudaemonist, convinced and consistent all his life" that happiness is the chief pursuit of humanity, even if humans mostly pursue happiness in the wrong

ways (81-82). Outler claims that not only did Wesley insist on this link between holiness and happiness, but he also lived it, dying a happy man, praising God, and singing joyously (87). An amazing consistency exists between Wesley's equation of happiness and holiness, Aristotle's teleological argument concerning *eudaimonia*, Cassian's emphasis on the goal of human life, and Aquinas' view of imperfect happiness. They all represent a higher form of living than is generally achieved by humans, but that is attainable with human effort, with or without the cooperation of God, depending on the presence of a faith framework of the theorist. Happiness, according to these great minds, is the ultimate human achievement.

A Biblical Understanding of Happiness

In John's Gospel, in a lengthy monologue following Jesus' encounter with some Pharisees who were critical of his Sabbath healing of the man born blind, Jesus used the shepherd metaphor to describe his leadership in comparison to the leadership of others, namely the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day. As noted earlier, he stated his purpose in coming, his goal in leading in John 10:10. In contrast to "the thief," whose goal is to destroy life, to slaughter life, Jesus came to give life in all its fullness. The desire of the Good Shepherd is to give life in abundance, even superfluity of life (Brown 394; Barrett 373). The Greek word is *perisson*.

Perisson, when used outside the New Testament means to be present overabundantly, to be superfluous, a superabundance, to overflow, to make over-rich. In the Septuagint, it is used to describe having more than enough of something, as in the fullness of joy. In this particular context, it carries a connotation of fullness that is present in the age of salvation over and against the old age. Jesus' ministry ushered in this new

age (Hauck, "*Perisseuo*" 58-59). The word translated as life is the word *zoe*, as opposed to the word *bios*. The use of *zoe* points to a spiritual quality of this life that Jesus offers in its fullness.

To imagine Jesus intended to offer an overabundance of misery, that he actually desired people to live lives of unhappiness and dissatisfaction, lives characterized by a lack of psychological well-being, is absurd when compared to the message of Jesus presented in the gospels. However, speaking of happiness in certain religious circles invites criticism and disbelief. Sermons titled, "Jesus Does Not Want You to Be Happy, but Holy," utterly miss the point of both happiness and holiness. If God is good, and if he created people in his image, and if he enjoys any kind of happiness within himself, then surely he created humans with the desire that they actualize their full capacity of happiness, wholeness, and holiness.

The life the Good Shepherd offers in superabundance must be a life conceptualized as enjoyable. Jesus offers all persons a *happy* life. Juxtapose this statement of Jesus with the general feeling among some that the life of faith is too serious to be enjoyed. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always." Paul not only gives an imperative command to rejoice always, but he also claims that this rejoicing is God's will for his people. Paul, when speaking of joy, particularly his own experience of joy, bases it not on his current circumstances but on the reality that God's new age is breaking into this age, giving people reason enough to rejoice (Smith 731-32). The joyful attitude and feelings the people of God experience result from living out God's will and plan as they join God in establishing his kingdom on earth, anticipating the fullness of that kingdom at the *parousia*. Even if the very living of this life brings people into difficult

circumstances, or in Paul's case, life-threatening circumstances, the desire of God is that his children derive joy from knowing, experiencing, and living his will. If God did not intend people to live a happy lives, lives that are fulfilling and contented, then he would not have instructed them to rejoice in life.

Some criticisms of this use of happiness or *eudaimonia* have come from more thoughtful quarters. Wright argues that Aristotle was wrong when he claimed the *telos* of human activity is *eudaimonia*. His specific opprobrium is against Aristotle's claim that *eudaimonia* is limited to individualistic categories. Aristotle taught that *eudaimonia* is experienced within the self-contained unit of a single person and that it can be attained independently and for the person's own sake outside the bounds of relationship. If the interpretation of *eudaimonia*, or happiness, is limited to this narrow view, then Wright is correct. However, the modern discussion of *eudaimonia* has expanded Aristotle's narrow construction. McMahon maintains that *eudaimonia,* as understood and used in the classical period, was actually part of a larger constellation of similar terms that included *makarios* ("From the Happiness" 7). This interpretation tempers Wright's criticism.

Wright argues that the *telos* to which all human behavior is aimed, or ought to be aimed, is not *eudaimonia* but *makarios* (the Hebrew *ashre* or *baruch*). Jesus highlighted *makarios* in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12). *Makarios*, or blessedness, occurs when God fulfills his purpose and promises in and through someone. Wright reasons that the Beatitudes are not necessarily descriptive of the current state of affairs, nor do they constitute a formula for self-improvement. Instead, the Beatitudes posit that God's new age is breaking into the present in and through the person of Jesus and that the life of heaven is coming true on earth (103). Wright is in agreement with Frederick Hauck and

Raymond Collins, who state that Beatitudes, in general, assume eschatological overtones. Beatitudes often occur in apocalyptic literature (Collins 629; Hauck, "*Makarios*: Word Group" 368). While Matthew 5 is not apocalyptic in the strictest sense, Jesus' teaching here does exhibit eschatological overtones. Jesus pronounces blessedness in the present; however, the reason for blessedness is generally some future occurrence. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). *Mourn*, in the Greek, is in the present tense. Those who mourn experience blessedness presently because they will be comforted. *Will be comforted* is in the future tense. They are currently blessed, but the future realization of that state of present blessedness is that they will be comforted. The comfort or the blessing comes in the age to come. Therefore, the present blessedness of the Beatitude will be fully realized in the eschaton.

Gaining a deeper understanding of the notion of blessedness is important in light of Wright's logic that the *telos* is or ought to be blessedness. The concept of blessing, particularly as communicated in the Old Testament, primarily focused on the benefits of the blessing: prosperity, power, and fertility. However, commentators relegated this view to secondary status by a more thorough examination of the texts. The most important way of understanding blessing is within the context of the relationship between the two parties—the blessor and the blessee (Richards 753-55). The Hebrew words *barakh* and *berakha* are seminal to understanding *blessing*. It occurs over four hundred times in the Old Testament. Of those occurrences, eighty-eight are in Genesis and eighty-three are in the Psalms. Over half of these occurrences are in the *Pi'el* verbal form, meaning "Blessed are you" or "Blessed be." This form is most often translated as *makarios* in the Septuagint (754). The original etymology of the word is confusing because of the diverse

and unrelated meanings of the root, *brk*. It can mean "to kneel," "knee" (Gen. 24:11; Ps. 95:6; Isa. 45:23), "pool, water reservoir, or basin" (Isa. 7:3). Kent Harold Richards and Josef Scharbert posit a slight basis for connecting *brk* with kneeling to pray, praise, or bless (Richards 753; Scharbert 279-280).

Moreover, if *kneeling* does not clarify the situation, Wright includes in the conversation another word often translated as bless or blessed, *ashre*. In Psalm 1, *ashre* is translated as *happy* in the New Revised Standard Version, *blessed* in the English Standard Version, and *makarios* in the Septuagint (LXX). James L. Mays, in his comments on Psalm 1, states that this beatitude points to and commands the conduct and character that enjoys the blessing (41). Not only is the blessing something received by God, but God also utilizes this word as a way of prescribing the behavior he desires in his children: "Blessed are those who do this, so go ahead and do this." Thus, a prudent admonition is found in Psalm 119:2: "Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart." *Ashre* is the Hebrew word translated as *happy*. Following Mays' logic, in order to be happy persons must seek after God with their whole heart. In so doing, a person will keep God's decrees. Happiness is linked to obedience.

The manner in which these words are used, *barakh*, *ashre*, and *makarios*, in the Old Testament, LXX, and New Testament, all point to a similar and important concept, that of a life of blessing, which is the gift of God and the result of interaction with God and obedience in following God's direction. Blessed by God is a state in which persons claiming God's leadership and care desire to live. The self does not manufacture blessedness; rather, he or she receives it from God. It is a life of prosperity and *happiness*, not in the more shallow sense against which Wright argues, but in the deeper

sense of blessedness that results from the person responding to the call of God through following the instruction found in his Word. In the biblical sense, blessedness is a higher form of happiness than Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, which Aristotle claims is fleeting and founded on potentially changing circumstances. If circumstances change for the worse, happiness will end. Biblical blessedness, or happiness, is not dependent on always experiencing positive life situations; in fact, persons living in adverse situations often feel this biblical happiness in spite of their circumstances. Certainly Jesus' Beatitudes point to very negative circumstances being a mere bump on the road toward the fulfillment of God's blessing and grace, that is, nonetheless, experienced in present reality.

Cassian, the fourth and fifth century monk who spent significant time in the Egypt learning from the desert fathers, quoting Abba Moses in his *Conferences,* claims that every human being has a *telos* and that *telos* is the kingdom of God. He actually employs language reminiscent of Aristotle, though writing for a Western audience in Latin, transliterating the Greek word *telos* (43). Cassian, as in the New Testament, utilizes eschatological overtones in his scheme. The asceticism of desert spirituality most likely does not qualify for what moderns would consider *happiness*, but current circumstances do not constitute the source of happiness. Happiness occurs because individuals who are serious about their relationship with God, serious enough to make that relationship the focus of all their activities, attain their goal through purity of heart, ultimately experiencing the kingdom.

A connection may be seen between the *makarios* type of happiness, or blessedness, and the abundant life that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, offers to his followers (John 10:10). The classical use of *makarios* within Greek poetry and its subsidiary form,

makar, was limited to the experience of the gods. Homer claimed mortals could only rarely encounter it, if at all. On the off chance they did, it referred to the transcendent happiness of life after death that was beyond care and labor. When used of humans, it described their experience of entering a godlike existence of blessedness in the afterlife on the isles of the blessed. *Eudaimon* was used as a synonym for *makarios*, referring to one who has a good *daemon*. It eventually becomes the leading philosophical term employed for happiness. After Aristotle, *makarios* devolves through ordinary usage, becoming a weaker, everyday word describing the social status of the wealthy who are above the normal cares and concerns of the common people (Hauck, "*Makarios*: Greek Usage" 362). In the LXX, *makarios* comes to indicate fullness of life, including having a wife, children then beauty, earthly well-being, honor, and wisdom (365). By the time of the New Testament, *makarios* has picked up the eschatological implications mentioned previously (Bertram 630).

The modern use of *eudaimonia*, particularly within the context of positive psychology and the use of it in this project, points more toward the richer and fuller sense captured in the biblical text, moving beyond the more narrow confines of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's main contribution is that human behavior is teleological and aimed at *eudaimonia*, not so much in his definition of eudaimonia, although his definition is instructive and helpful. *Eudaimonia*, when viewed through this lens, harkens back to the Greek context preceding Aristotle where philosophers used it as a synonym of *makarios*, carrying, now, the biblical nuance and expansion of the concept. To experience *eudaimonia*, *makarios*, *barukh*, *ashrei*, blessedness, or happiness is to enter into the breaking in of God's new age that is present in and through the person of Jesus of

Nazareth and to know the life of heaven here on earth. To experience God's will here and now is God's desire for human life. Jesus hoped people would receive the blessing of the abundant life (see Wright 103).

Philosophers, scholars, and pundits aimed their criticisms at Aristotle for millennia and most certainly continue. Aristotle offered *eudaimonia*; Jesus offered *makarios*. These two concepts are closely linked. Jesus' notion of blessedness contains the meaning of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, further explaining and enlightening humanity toward the ultimate end—happiness. Happiness, often used as an alternative translation of the biblical *makarios* and *baruch*, is a good term to use and a good end at which to aim. God certainly did not place people on earth to make them miserable. Rather, God's love and concern dictates that people seek out ways to live the best possible life in order to glorify and please God.

A Biblical Understanding of Human Strengths

Although the concept of human strengths as proposed by Seligman and others is a relatively new one that is particularly associated with the discipline of positive psychology, a solid biblical basis for this newfound understanding of human strengths can be developed. Scripture anticipated the discoveries neurologists and psychologists are only now making about the inner workings of the human brain and psyche. The biblical narrative must inform a well-formed anthropology.

The image of God. The search for the biblical understanding of strengths begins at the beginning. The origins of the human experiment within the creation account enlighten the understanding of the human search for happiness. Following several days of generative activity, the culmination of God's work is the creation of human beings:

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

This text testifies that the zenith of God's creative accomplishment was and is the creation of humanity itself. Everything else in creation leads up to this point in the story (Rad 55). The creation of the world, the waters, the plants, and animals all culminate in the endowment of these specific creatures with the image of God, the *imago Dei*. Various theories attempt to explicate the meaning of the image of God in humanity. Many of these arguments result in a dualistic split of the human person into his or her constituent parts, such as the physical versus the spiritual. However, any attempt to do so is to do violence to the text because the text itself makes clear that God created the whole person in the image of God (56). If the image of God encompasses the whole person, then it must include personality traits, psychology, physicality, as well as spirituality.

The image of God also encompasses community since the image is inherent in the maleness and femaleness of the human creature. The image of God most fully expresses itself in our differentness, uniqueness, and relatedness, not simply in an isolated individual (Brueggemann 34). All of the human strengths involve implications for relationship. The image of God, the height of God's creative activity, is articulated in its fullest richness in a community of persons, reflecting the very reality of the Trinity itself, that of relation and community. This assertion stands in direct contradiction to Aristotle's claim that a person may obtain *eudaimonia*, the end and goal of life, as an isolated individual. From a biblical starting point, community is inherent in happiness because it is an integral part of the human as created in the image of God.

As stated previously, the whole person, in his or her proper context, the community, reflects the image of God. This reality leads to the belief that a uniqueness, or differentness, of individual persons exists within community. Each person is distinct and unrepeatable, and each one, taken together in community, in relationship, somehow reflects the image of God. The image of God, including personality, psychology, spirituality, also includes the unique set of strengths each person possesses as part of his or her fundamental personal makeup. To live into the reality of the image of God is to live as the person God created, contributing his or her uniqueness to other persons as the person is drawn into relationship with God and with other persons in human community.

The concept of dominion plays a role in helping understand the image of God and the expression of human strengths as part of the image. The dominion with which God invested humanity (Gen. 1:26) is a shared dominion with God. God extends his dominion through the exercise of human dominion over creation. According to Gerhard von Rad, the idea of dominion draws on the role of kings in the ancient world. A king erected images or emblems of himself throughout his kingdom in order to serve as reminders of his rule. In the same way, the author of Genesis uses this ancient practice as an analogy of how God placed humans on the earth in order to serve as God's image to enforce his leadership, authority, or dominion over his creation. Humans do not have inherent dominion but possess a derivative dominion extending God's (60).

The psalmist proposes a dominion of humanity in Psalm 8:5-6: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet." Ian Hart considers Psalm 8 as a commentary on Genesis 1:26-31 (320). Individuals

using their strengths, as a reflection of a their creation in the image of God, is a way of exercising dominion over creation. Hart also points out that an alternative translation of dominion is *management*. The King not only allows humans to enjoy a rank of dominion over the rest of creation, but he gives humans a task, the task of management, or cultivation, of the creation. Cultivation derives from the concept of subjection, so that in cultivating the earth one simultaneously subdues it, causing it to produce what one needs it to produce to promote life. This dominion is an expression of the image and offers another conceptualization of human strengths as derivative of the image.

Strengths and dominion combine to form a functional view of the image of God. Hart argues that the functional conception of the image of God in Genesis 1, as revealed in Psalm 8, is an exclusive way of interpreting this concept. Alternative views such as the relationship between humanity's spiritual qualities and the image and the purpose of communion with God are unnecessary. The primary reason God created was for humans to carry out the task of dominion over or management of creation (323). Following this logic, however, Hart sets up an unbiblical dichotomy between *being* and *doing*, coming down on the side of *doing* in his interpretation of the image. Divorcing these concepts is unnecessary and inappropriate. If, like Catherine Mowry LaCugna, John Zizioulas, Karl Rahner, and others, the creation of humans in God's image is envisaged using relational terms, then examining the *being* side of the equation in addition to the functional side makes sense. Hart draws attention exclusively to the functional, doing side. It can just as easily be understood as both. God creates for communion, and because humans are in communion with God, he calls persons to join him in exercising dominion, being his representatives to creation in cultivating and bringing creation to its fullest creative and

life-giving potential. Exercising dominion over creation can be understood as a function of communion with God. Both God's desire for communion and his endowing persons with unique talents and strengths lead to a greater sense of happiness as persons engage their strengths in relation to God exercising dominion over creation.

Another approach toward understanding dominion as it relates to human persons created in the image of God is through the lens of John Wesley's thought. Wesley proposed that the image of God is threefold: natural, political, and moral (K. Collins 51). The natural image of God includes the elements of understanding, will, and liberty. The political image of God is exercised through the dominion God gave to humans over creation: "Humanity, according to Wesley, is the great conduit, the chosen channel, of God's blessings for the rest of creation" (54). The moral image of God is the chief, or principal, part of the image of God because the moral image contains that which is not shared with other creatures, the ability to enter into and live in relationship with God in true righteousness and holiness (54-55, 63). Wesley combined the functional and relational aspects of conceptualizing the image of God.

God's handiwork. In the New Testament, Paul writes about the creative work of God in humanity in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (NIV). The word translated as *handiwork* is the Greek *poiēma*. This word aids the understanding of human strengths because of its implications about the kind of work God accomplished in creating human persons. Another translation uses *masterpiece* for *poiēma* (NLT). *Poiēma* insinuates the work of an artisan, who through an individual creative act produces a unique work of art. The word often occurs within a poetic context of a writer producing a

new poem (Braun 471; Barth 226). Considering a human being as a masterpiece of artwork differs radically from conceptualizing humans as mere products of mass production. In Georgetown, Kentucky, Toyota Manufacturing produces Camrys. The autoworkers meticulously manufacture these automobiles to very exacting standards and specifications. The goals of the autoworker are uniformity and sameness. The goals of the artisan are uniqueness and beauty. God aims at uniqueness when crafting human persons.

The key to a joyful and fulfilling life for persons is being who they are, not attempting to pressing themselves into the mold of others' expectations or living up to a preconceived notion of what success is supposed to look like. To be successful in life is to be successful in being the persons God made them. When a person stands before God on Judgment Day, God will not ask if he or she was a good version of his or her father, or aunt, or teacher, or coach, or boss. God will inquire if the person lived into the reality of who he created the person to be.

The second portion of this text testifies to the truth that God creates human persons with a view to the good works that are to be performed by them: "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10b, NIV). Even in light of the Fall, God desires persons created in his image to perform good works. This text testifies to this end. God always creates in order to accomplish God's will. In fact, God calls people to *walk* in these good works. The lifestyle of the Christian consists of good works (Best 230-31). The works are good by virtue of God's goodness, not the person's in the doing of the works. These works are eternal in the sense that they were prepared beforehand and they endure into eternity. They are more than simply tasks to be accomplished. Instead, they represent the way in which persons created in the image

of God live (Barth 242, 251-52). Linking persons created by God as his work of art and the good works God calls them to accomplish implies that these good works are custom fitted. A relationship exists between the uniqueness of being and the works in which persons are called to engage. If God calls persons to an abundant life, then they must believe the works to which he calls persons to fulfill are suitable to the persons he created them to be. Human strengths, talents, personality traits, and interests play a role in the relationship between creation as persons in the image of God and the roles and works to which God calls persons to live.

Another familiar text regarding the individuality of the human person as created by God is Psalm 139:13-14: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (ESV). The psalmist acknowledges God as fashioner of the person in poetic and beautiful language. A more literal translation does not seem quite as picturesque in the English language. The Hebrew *khilyotai*, what we translate as *inward parts* is more properly translated with the word *kidneys* (Allen 317; Kraus 510). Waxing eloquently about God's creation of kidneys rings not particularly poetic. The kidneys seem like such an ordinary part of the human body, and their function is so unimpressive, even if vitally necessary. However, to the Hebrew mind, the kidneys were the seat of the human conscience. According to this understanding, kidneys serve as the origin of the human will and the root of human desire. Indeed, more than their physiological function, which the ancient Hebrews most probably did not fully understand, they believed the kidneys played an important roll in determining the personality (Allen 330; Kraus 516). The psalmist refers to God's comprehensive concern

for the psalmist, seeing himself as the object of God's creative work even prior to his birth. This train of thought is in line with one of the main themes of the psalm, that of God's ongoing creativity and complete knowledge of the human person (Allen 329).

Every part of the human person is under the creative touch of the Divine Artisan. He shapes, molds, and empowers even the minutest detail of human personhood. God creates the whole person, making the person who he or she is. The inner part of the conscience, will, and personality is a gift from God. God observes the entirety of the human person, even if the person is unaware of the intricacies of his or her own exceptional qualities. God is fully aware because he is the cause. Each individual person, endowed with a distinctive set of talents, traits, and strengths, reflects in his or her own way the image of God. God's constant and ongoing creating has made each person. The psalmist revels in his uniqueness and in the wonderment of God's creation of himself. He is amazed at the absolute knowledge God has of him, of the intricate understanding God possesses. The psalmist juxtaposes this insight to the limited knowledge the he has of God (Allen 330) and even of himself. Initially when thinking of this psalm, some may think of it as being limited to the physical creation of the body. This would be a mistake, however, because this conceptualization of creation implies a duality: good versus evil or spiritual versus physical. Instead, the psalm makes the argument that God creates and is concerned about the whole of his creation, the whole person, as acknowledged in God's creation of the kidneys, the seat of the will and conscience. The inner part of a person referenced here is the origin of his or her innermost thoughts. This inner part influences the *who* of a person's true identity. God created the inner self. Each human person is a

unique creation of God, an expression of God's creative powers, and comes under God's constant concern. God's constant care watches over everything about the human person.

Kingdom assignments according to uniqueness. The concept of human talents and strengths as an indelible expression of the uniqueness of individual human personhood is best demonstrated in Jesus' parable of the talents found in Matthew 25:14-30. This parable is set in a lengthy eschatological monologue on the Mount of Olives shortly before the Passover when Jesus would be arrested. Particularly, in the three parables of Matthew 25, the theme of punishment and reward is highlighted, encouraging the disciples of Jesus to be ready for the great judgment by carrying out the works of the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the talents is the middle of these three parables.

The overarching storyline of the parable is that of a businessman who was about to embark on a lengthy journey and charged three of his slaves to manage large sums of money during his absence. He gave to one slave five talents, to a second he gave two, and to a third, he gave one talent. Jesus stated that he gave "to each according to his ability" (Matt. 25:15). Upon the master's return, the first two slaves had doubled their money, while the third had only saved his by burying it in a hole in the ground. The master awarded two savvy slaves while the apparently fearful and lazy slave he punished.

In general, parables are meant to convey one specific meaning about the truth of the kingdom of God; however, this parable needs an allegorical interpretation due to the obvious nature of the meaning of the symbols within (Davies and Allison 402). The businessman was Jesus, the slaves were his followers, and the talents were the key to understanding this story and have been variously interpreted. Interpreters have understood the talents as spiritual gifts, God's gifts in general (as opposed to *spiritual*

gifts), natural abilities, faith, and opportunities to do kingdom work, among other readings (Davies and Allison 405; Gundry 510). Perhaps the most popular modern understanding has to do with talents as natural human abilities and inclinations, as in, "She has a talent for music."

In whatever manner readers interpreted the talents, in the life situation in which the story was first told, a talent was a measure of weight used monetarily. A talent was the largest denomination, weighting approximately fifty pounds and equaling roughly six thousand denarii, a denarius being the appropriate wage for one day of manual labor (Davies and Allison 405; Gundry 503). Jesus told a story dealing with enormous sums of money. Some would argue that the master would not entrust such large amounts to mere slaves; however, slaves in the Ancient Near East were assigned a wide range of responsibilities, including overseeing entire households (Davies and Allison 405). Whatever the specific interpretation of a talent, a talent was something held in high esteem constituting a large value.

When the master returned from his trip, he gathered his slaves for an accounting of their stewardship during his absence and found that two of them were faithful because they had doubled his investment, so he offered them even more to supervise and welcomed them into the joy of their master (Matt. 25:21, 23). The third slave, fearing the master as a "hard man," simply hid the talent in a hole in the ground. The master noted the laziness of this slave and cast him into the outer darkness in the midst of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:50). The reaction of the master is juxtaposed to the assumption of the slave. The slave approached the master with a prepared speech about his diligence considering the business prowess of the master. The slave feared losing

what had been entrusted to him, but the master saw the slave as slothful and punished him (Davies and Allison 408-09). Profit motivated the master, and the servant should have done something, anything, to produce a return. The first two slaves took the risks and the master rewarded them. The last simply tried to protect himself and, as a result, lost everything (Garland 242).

The parable underscores the absolute necessity incumbent on followers of Jesus to be about their Master's business, which, because their master is Jesus Christ, is the business of the kingdom of God. God gives disciples something of great value; however, he does not endow everyone with the same quantity of *talent*. Each person receives from the Lord according to his or her ability. Therefore, from this parable readers can deduce that persons are unique and distinguishable from one another and that God takes into account their various capacities and manages each person according to his or her uniqueness. If readers interpret talents as opportunities to do kingdom ministry, per Robert Horton Gundry and others, then they may view the parable in light of human strengths. God gives these kingdom assignments according to the unique set of strengths with which he endows each person. If the talents are interpreted as God's gifts in general, as W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison suggest, then readers could easily imply that human strengths are part of God's general, creation gifts to each individual person. Merton in his *Thoughts in Solitude*, considers the talents in the parable as natural human temperament believed to be a gift of God, used in a life of contemplation or whatever vocation to which individuals are called. Some temperaments more naturally flow with a life of contemplation than others do, but God calls all people to use whatever gifts they possess (22). Certainly, a strong link exists between temperament and human strengths in human

personality. Whatever the case, strengths, as best understood as part of God's good gift to humans, are to be utilized for kingdom ministry.

God calls and God equips. God affirms the ministry of all God's people in the story of the call of Abraham: "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2b). This text represents the paradigm for the ministry God calls all persons to adopt throughout salvation history. God ministers his salvation to everyone through his unique and called-out people. The blessing is not exclusive to the people of God; rather God desires they share the blessing with those on the outside of the covenant relationship. Jesus, himself, serves in the model of Abraham, conveying the blessing of God to unqualified outsiders (Brueggemann 120). The context of human strengths cannot be limited to a discussion of self-fulfillment and happiness. Although as noted earlier, God's design for human persons is a deep and abiding sense of happiness. The people of God discover the path to a flourishing life in engaging their strengths in order to extend the blessing of the God of Abraham to all peoples of the planet (see Gen. 12:3). God created his people for works of ministry (Eph. 2:10) and blesses them to bless others. The people of God join their faith to Abraham's faith in responding to the promise of blessing by being a blessing to others. The call of God on Abraham's life is imperative, just as imperative as God's call on the lives of modern Christ followers to build for the kingdom. The blessing and the kingdom go hand-in-hand as God's goal, his plan for history. It reaches beyond God's concern for his chosen people to include peoples and families of all nations, even if Abraham, at the time, does not fully understand all the ramifications. God called and still calls (Brueggemann 118; Rad 160-61).

John Chrysostom agrees:

> The most perfect rule of Christianity, its exact definition, its highest summit, is this: to seek what is for the benefit of all. I cannot believe that it is possible for a man to be saved if he does not labour for the salvation of his neighbor. (qtd. in Ware 39)

The urgency of the Parable of the Talents, which serves more as a warning, and the reality of the uniqueness of God's creation of humans as demonstrated in Genesis 1, Ephesians 2:10, and Psalm 139, along with the implicit call for the people of God heard in Genesis 12, point to the truth that God gifts human persons with distinctive talents, traits, strengths, and personalities for use in building for the kingdom. God rewards people's lives with fulfillment and happiness in the present and glory as the children of God in the eschaton.

God issues one call to all persons. This singular calling, to be a Christ follower, includes a call to serve. To be a Christ follower is to be a servant. This paradigm is introduced earlier with Abraham. God calls Abraham, and, as an integral part of that calling, God blesses Abraham in order that God through Abraham might bless the rest of the world. His call on Abraham's life requires a response of faith on Abraham's part. This faith response is Abraham's action of leaving his home country to go with God to the place of Promise. The Apostle Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3:6: "Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (NRSV). The righteousness to which Paul refers is the righteousness of right relationship. God counts this belief as righteousness to Abraham because he believed what God said when he blessed him and he expressed that belief in the action of leaving home and following God. Paul uses this incident to highlight the importance of faith. Abraham exhibits the faith of a son of God. He responds to God's call. The call is to faith and responding to the call results in blessing to others.

Karl Ludwig Schmidt claims Martin Luther, looking to expand the concept of vocation as used in the context of Christian monasticism, applied the concept to secular life. Luther applied 1 Corinthians 7:20, "Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called," as an instance of his notion of a secular calling, a calling outside of the religious life (contra Roman Monasticism). The context refers to the life situation in which the follower of Jesus was called, such as slaves, circumcised or uncircumcised, or married or single. Paul refers to the condition in which individuals find themselves when they received God's call to be Christians, not that God called each of them to a particular condition. Luther misapplied the text. The calling is to the Christian faith, not to any particular life situation, station, or status (Schmidt 491-92). Markus Barth agrees. Commenting on Ephesians 1:18, he writes that calling is a part of both creation and election. He further states that through this act of creation and election, "non-being becomes being, non-beloved becomes beloved" (151). Barth's remarks raise the concept of calling to an ontological level, which has interesting implications when considering the theological ramifications of the anthropology of Zizioulas in relation to his theology of the Trinity.

Barth claims that the call of God is not a one-time event but functions continually as God leads persons to lives of worthy conduct (151). This one calling, or vocation, is the call of God to all to enter his kingdom (480). Barth emphasizes that the call of God is a call to a high responsibility and task (454). Thus, the implications of Ephesians 4:1 are important: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Commenting on the verse, Ernest Best argues that the calling about which Paul is writing refers to the general calling to be a Christian,

not to any particular function or position in the church (361). Likewise, Ben Witherington, III states, in agreement with Barth and Best, that the biblical concept of calling is not a calling to ministry, per se, but a calling to be a Christian. He acknowledges that this calling to be a Christian includes a calling to ministry in the general sense. To be in ministry means being a Christian (284).

Therefore, the call of God encompasses the call to faith and the call to ministry. In Ephesians 4:12 Paul writes that the saints are equipped in order to do the work of ministry. The call to ministry comes within the context of the call to be a follower of Jesus. These two calls are actually one call. If persons are *saints*, Paul's common term for Christians, then they are to be equipped for works of ministry in order that they will actually do works of ministry.

The equipping of the saints results from the actions of certain gifts God has given to the church, namely leaders whose role is to proclaim and explain the Scriptures. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:11 about this gift of persons: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (ESV). These persons, persons who fulfill a particular function in the church, a "Ministry of the Word" (Barth 482-83; Best 388), exercise these functions, or roles, in equipping the saints for works of ministry (Eph. 4:12a). This ministry of the Word would include proclamation and application of the reality of the various spiritual gifts, helping people understand that each person is given at least one spiritual gift for the building up of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). The equipping role would not be exhausted by this function, and helping people discover their uniqueness as children of God, created in the image of God, today includes helping them

discover and engage their God-given human strengths in following their calling to be faithful followers of Christ involved in kingdom-building ministry.

Paul uses three prepositional phrases in Ephesians 4:12 to describe the ministry of the word by apostles, prophets, teachers, and pastors: for equipping the saints, for the work of ministry, and for the building up of the body of Christ. Leaders take on the role of equipping. Equipping is, perhaps, the leader's primary role. The saints do the work of ministry in order to build up the body of Christ. These works of ministry result from the equipping ministry of the leaders (Witherington 291; Hoehner 551). This ministry of equipping is a ministry of empowering followers of Christ to discover that they were created by God uniquely for the purpose of doing the good works he planned from the beginning (Eph. 2:10). These good works result in the whole body of Christ, as a corporate person, growing into the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13-14; Hoehner 558; Lincoln 256). This maturity and full stature in Christ must certainly include the abundant life Jesus offers in John 10:10. In order for people to experience the fulfilling life God gives, they must respond to the call to Christ, which includes the call to be equipped to serve according to who and how God made persons in order to build up the body of Christ.

Helping people discover their strengths and utilize those strengths in ministry can enable pastors and church leaders to empower people to experience the abundant life of happiness and fulfillment God desires people to experience, greatly alter the Pareto principle as more and more Christ followers discover they are indeed able to do the things God uniquely calls them to do.

The problem with weaknesses. Any discussion of human strengths and the utilization of those strengths in ministry, even a preference for using strengths in ministry, is bound to raise objections from the citation of Paul's discussion of his weaknesses. D. G. McCartney argues, "Any claim of human strength—that is to say any denial of human weakness—undermines the essentially gracious character of the Gospel" (5). However, he is referring to weaknesses and strengths in the context of morality, actually more akin to the idea of a moral strength. The current discussion of human strengths does not convey a necessarily moral implication, except to say that human strengths are linked to the living out of virtues. God endows, by grace, strengths as a part of human makeup and personality, possibly restored by common grace or prevenient grace, if one is employing a juridical soteriology.

Regardless of soteriology, however, the weakness to which Paul refers is most likely not moral weakness and not juxtaposed with human strengths as defined in this study. Margaret E. Thrall, in her study of 2 Corinthians, proffers three categories of possible interpretation of weakness in Paul: (1) an internal psychological state—temptation or grief, (2) external opposition, and (3) physical illness or disability. She uses a significant amount of her text discussing the various possibilities (809-18). Ultimately, she argues that the weakness and Paul's thorn are identical and are to be understood as a physical malady. Paul's weakness causes acute pain but is sporadic rather than permanent, something that flares up but then wanes, enabling him to carry on his work. This malady might have been migraine headaches. Thrall's explanation is consistent with some early exegetes, including Tertullian and Jerome, who interpreted the weakness and thorn as pain and discomfort in Paul's head (814, 817-18).

Whatever the weakness, most modern scholars agree it was physical in nature, particularly including Paul's susceptibility to death, just as Christ was susceptible to death on the cross. In his ministry, Paul was in danger of suffering and death every day. Paul embraces and glories in his weakness because in it he finds an affinity with Christ and experiences the power of God manifested through weakness because of the resurrection. Without the weakness of suffering and death, the power of God remains hidden. Paul asked God to remove this thorn in the flesh and received God's answer that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Paul now chooses to emphasize his weakness. The thorn serves as a constant reminder of Paul's limited humanness, causing him to depend on God all the more (R. Martin 420, 424; Thrall 882, 884). Paul's famous assertion in 2 Corinthians 12 does not rule out dependence on human strengths. He is discussing something entirely different from human strengths as an expression of the uniqueness of the human person as created in the image of God. The fact that a person operates out of the strengths and talents God has given does not negate the necessity of dependence on God, particularly when facing the limitations of human life in the face of suffering and death. Utilizing human strengths in ministry is actually another way of expressing dependence on God due to the realization that strengths are an endowment from and gift of God to be used for God's purposes.

Obviously, in addition to whatever physical ailments persons experience they also exhibit emotional, character, and spiritual weaknesses. Looking to Paul as a model, Christians may embrace their weaknesses as they grow in self-awareness and self-acceptance, expressing their full dependence on God. This dependence is a dependence of

the whole person, strengths and weaknesses, believing that the glory belongs to God for any good that persons contribute to building for the kingdom.

A Theological Understanding of Strengths

A theological understanding of strengths depends on a Trinitarian theology of relational grace. The uniqueness of each person created in the image of the Trinity serves as the basis for formulating a theology of the unique set of strengths possessed by all persons. Grace results in persons being endowed with strengths at the very beginning of their existence. Seeing strengths in light of the Trinity and grace is the subject of this section.

A Trinitarian approach to strengths. A strengths-based approach to ministry finds the basis of its theological expression in an understanding of the unique personhood expressed in the context of the theology of the Trinity. A reading of Stephen A. Seamands' book, *Ministry in the Image of God*, was the impetus to this entire line of thinking. Seamands argues that Christians must envision ministry, any ministry, from the perspective of the Trinity (9-10). The Spirit constitutes the body of Christ, and the ministry of Christ is the ministry of the Church. The Father initiates the mystery of Christ by sending the Son, so the eternal plan of the Trinity to be in relationship with humanity and all creation is possible. God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit intends to include the entirety of the created order in the very life of God (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* 211). Relationship occurs between unique persons, as in the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, so that relationship extends to unique persons created in the image of God. Each person's distinctive set of human strengths is an expression of that uniqueness, which flourishes only within the confines of this relationship.

Unfortunately, much of the writing concerning the theology of the Trinity tends to emphasize the inner life of God, an inner life elusive and impossible to penetrate, what theologians refer to as the immanent Trinity. According to many scholars, the theology of the Trinity reached its apex in the writings of the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. The complexity of his Trinitarian thought, however, left thinking about the Trinity to the realm of professional theologians and seemingly irrelevant to everyday spiritual experience (Grenz 13). An alternative perspective to the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. Economic, from the Greek *oikonomia*, is understood in the context of the stewardship of a household, in this instance, God's stewardship of his interaction with his creation. The economic Trinity is the concept of the Trinity gained by studying how God has acted throughout and revealed himself in all of salvation history.

However the theology of the immanent and economic Trinity is divided, nothing can actually be said about the immanent Trinity that is not also explicitly true of the economic Trinity. The only thing that can be said with any sense of integrity about the Trinity is that which the Trinity has revealed in the economy of salvation. No way of making any kind of distinction between a doctrine of the Trinity and a doctrine of the economy of salvation exists (Rahner 23-24). To expend energy thinking about things about can never be known is unreasonable and impractical. The inner life of the Trinity, the immanent Trinity, is one such thing. To talk about something that can never be experienced is impossible. According to Rahner, "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity" (22). All that can be known about the Trinity is what is known from the revelation of God through salvation history, which is primarily done in Scripture, God's self-revelation. This trend

toward studying the economic Trinity rescues Trinitarian theology from the realm of academia and makes it available for understanding everyday ministry experiences and, particularly, the study of human strengths in relation to God's salvation of humanity.

LaCugna writes about this rescue of the Trinity:

> To say that the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical implications for Christian life makes sense when the theology of God is removed from the realm of speculation of God *in se* to the realm of reflection on God-for-us as revealed in creation, in the face of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit who brings about communion between God and creature. (*God* 250)

Considering the economy of God opens a new world of speculation to inquiry and exploration. Most important to the current study is the understanding of relational and unique personhood.

Trinitarian theology in the economic vein of Rahner, LaCugna, and others makes an ontological claim about the reality of God, that God's very being is relational. An ontology of relationship directs how one reflects on God, seeing that God is personal in the sense that God is relational. Unlike humans, God freely chooses to relate to the other. God created the other, freely choosing to be in relation to the other. God's relation with the other is an ecstatic movement out of the relationship of the persons of the Trinity. God is Trinity; thus, God is person in relation, Father to Son, Son to Father, Father to Spirit, Son to Spirit. God is a community of relations. The Triune God moves out of himself in the divine mission through the Incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. It is in this sending that God is known in the first place. LaCugna and others focus preeminently on this meaning of the economy of God (LaCugna, "Philosophers" 177).

The Trinity consists of persons in communion; the relationality of the communion of persons enables love to be comprehended and experienced. "God is love," according to

1 John 4:16. Love is constitutive of God's very being, his substance. Love is the very thing that makes God who God is (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* 46). To exist is to be a person; to be a person is to be in relationship with other persons. Love is the hallmark of relationship because love freely expresses itself in relationship. The Trinity invites humanity to join a relationship of love. The offer of relationship motivates the mission of God, that is, the Father's mission of sending the Son and the Holy Spirit. The calling to utilize human strengths in relation to God, in the mission of God, is the primary calling of all human persons. The vocation of Abraham to be a blessing is the vocation of everyone, responding to God's blessing.

The concept of personal space is discovered in the understanding of God as three persons in communion:

> The space in which three persons are for and from each other [is found] in their otherness. They thus confer particularity upon and receive it from one another. Their inseparable relatedness confer particularity and freedom on each other. That is their personal being. (Gunton 56)

In the bridging of this personal space, the unique personhood of one connects to the unique personhood of another in relationship.

An ontology of relation implies an understanding of unique personhood that is vital to any study of human strengths. Person, as conceived by moderns in the West, is the sense of the individual person, the thinking, self-conscious individual. According to René Decartes, "I think; therefore, I am." Theologically, though, true personhood evolves not from isolation and individuality but from relationship. Love and communion constitute the person (Zizioulas, "Doctrine" 58-59). Rather than understanding being and personhood in relationship to some inner quality or self-propagating reality, personhood is determined in relationship. A new axiom arises: "I relate; therefore, I am." However, in

order to be in relationship, an individual must be a unique, exclusive, one of a kind, inimitable, distinctive person. Otherwise, he or she has nothing with which to relate to the other, and being is absorbed into the being of the other.

Zizioulas argues that the Trinity is a communion of unique persons.

> The person cannot exist in isolation. God is not alone; He is communion. Love is not a feeling, a sentiment springing from nature like a flower from a tree. Love is relationship. It is the free coming out of one's self, the breaking of one's will, a free submission to the will of another. It is the other and our relationship with him that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us "who we are," i.e., persons; for by being an inseparable part of a relationship that matters ontologically we emerge as unique and irreplaceable entities. This, therefore, is what accounts for our being, and our being ourselves and not someone else: our personhood. ("Doctrine" 56-57)

This relationship, this fellowship, this communion, this *koinōnia*, extends from the life of the Trinity by the Father's sending of the Son and sending of the Spirit to constitute human community. However, persons do not lose themselves in communion; rather, communion reveals the uniqueness and importance of each individual. Communion constitutes the person as fully valued and fully expressed. LaCugna states that this conception of communion leads to a compelling apprehension of the individual:

> The community of Jesus Christ is the one gathering place in which persons are to be accepted and valued unconditionally, as equal partners in the divine dance. The equality of persons derives from the fact that all are equally companions in the mystery of divine-human communion. The roles of persons in community will always differ, as will their gifts and talents, their needs and demands. (*God* 299)

Persons most fully express their uniqueness and individuality in relationship to God and others. In communion, in relationship, the truth of each person as a unique, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable being is realized.

The concept of the image of God expresses the truth of this relationality. For Wesley, "the *imago Dei* must be understood in a *relational* way as the very emblem of holy love" (original emphasis, K. Collins 51). The fact that God creates persons in his image implies they experience an important sense of personal reality. Unique personhood is, itself, the meaning of being made in the image of God. Unique personhood is expressed in communion and is an expression of the image of God. God exists as a *koinōnia* of persons related to one another, so humanness, reflecting the image of God, includes relatedness to God and other human persons (Gunton 58). The image of God, in addition to other interpretations, implies that persons are unique and unrepeatable and exist in relationship and cannot be understood as existing at all outside of relationship.

When LaCugna refers to each person's gifts and talents, she is not using these terms in their technical, scriptural meaning; rather, she is using them in a general way to speak of the unique qualities of individual persons. Human strengths are expressed as the uniqueness of each person in and for relationality, not only for the person himself or herself. Relatedness implies difference, for the same entity is not related to itself; it is itself. To be related is to be different. An expression of this differentness is discovered in the various combinations of talents and strengths that, from recent research in psychology, seem to be inborn. Even identical twins, which share the exact same genetic blueprint, are different in many aspects: fingerprints, preferences, and personalities. Biologically, these differences are difficult to explain because they share the exact same biological blueprint. Theology offers additional insight: The Creator God endows each person is with the image of God, and each person exists as a unique individual in relationship to the Trinity and to other human persons.

A real tension arises between maintaining a belief in the unique, individual, strengths-endowed person and the belief that the identity of person is found solely in relation. Western Christianity is highly influenced by an individualism dominated by an isolationist worldview. In this isolationism, the individual defined himself or herself as exclusive and separate from community. To discuss human strengths in the context of DNA, referring to the uniqueness and differentness of persons can be understood as playing into an isolationist and individualized view of human personhood. However, personhood, defined in Trinitarian terms, sees persons in relation. Seamands indicates, "Moving churches in the West toward a trinitarian model of church life will involve a major paradigm shift away from our pervasive individualistic ways of thinking" (39). Strengths thinking has the potential to shift the church away from individualism. Personal strengths exist to enable persons to contribute to the larger community, for joining God in his relational mission of empowering people to discover the salvation of relationship with God and with the human family of unique persons created in the image of God. Human strengths, utilized in ministry, are the expression of people's uniqueness, which exists for the enriching of relationships and leads to wholeness-holiness-happiness.

Human strengths are not constitutive of personhood; instead, they are an expression and result of unique personhood. Personhood, as an ontological category is not necessarily made up of gifts, talents, strengths, or any other capacity (Zizioulas, "On Being a Person" 45). However, persons undoubtedly express their uniqueness through their various capacities. If persons are to be valued in community, the expression of their value will be seen in their signature strengths, in the traits and expressed values each person demonstrates and uses in community in order to build community in cooperation

with the Holy Spirit. Persons are valued for their personhood, first, and then make their contribution to community via their personality and uniqueness, as articulated in their unique set of human strengths and talents.

Ultimately, right relationship with God expresses personhood. As long as people lack the experience of right relationship with the Triune God, they are not fully persons. Christ restores personhood, even though it is marred by sin. Persons realize the fullness of that restoration in sanctification or, as Christians in the East term it, deification. The final and ultimate fulfillment of personhood occurs only when God is all in all in the final consummation of God's ultimate plan for the cosmos (Gunton 58, 60). If the fullness of personhood is restored in salvation, then personhood is present, no matter how far along or not someone is in the process. Therefore, in a sense, one could say, that inasmuch as persons use their God-given strengths, they operate in the true self, the self created in the image of God. If a person is unique, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable, then that person maintains his or her uniqueness, whether or not he or she is actively responding to God's grace at any particular time. God grants the uniqueness of the person as a gift in the very creation of that person.

Strengths and grace. The Reformed concept of common grace serves as an additional lens through which to view human strengths. When considering humans in light of devastating effects of original sin it becomes difficult to conceptualize anything good issuing forth from humanity due to total depravity. The Fall damaged the image of God, rendering humans utterly incapable of producing anything construed as good. To guard against arguments from nature and human experience, Reformed theologians developed the notion of a grace available to all and effective in all, which they referred to

as common grace, distinguishable from the particular grace of salvation. Out of God's fatherly love, he interposed a general, or common, grace on all persons, regardless of their election as children of God (Bavinck 117-18). In John Calvin's thought, this grace, which he never explicitly identifies as common or general grace, functions as a restraining force applied to fallen human nature. Human nature allowed to run its course would result in the total ruination of humanity. Instead, God applies this common grace and partially restores his image in humans (276, 292). This partially restored humanity retains the ability to act with limited moral integrity, revealing "some sparks of [God's] glory" (52, 293). Therefore, the grace of God is applied to all persons, whether reprobate or elect, unregenerate or regenerate. In the Gospel, Jesus testifies to the universality of God's grace:

> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:44-45)

Jesus considers the sun and rain as grace from God. He does not discriminate when issuing these blessings, so Jesus admonishes people to love everyone, including their enemies, due to the fact that God blesses them as well as those who are not enemies. God's grace is available to all and effective for all.

Common grace serves as a logical explanation for the restoration of strengths in light of total depravity. Anthony A. Hoekema notes that gifts can be observed in unregenerate human beings. Those gifts must be gifts from God because they are good. Hoekema raises the difficulty that it seems impossible for unregenerate persons to possess gifts from God apart from God's grace. He plainly observes non-Christians producing many enjoyable and good cultural products, particularly through artistic

expression in fields such as architecture, sculpture, painting, and music. He argues that these are indeed gifts of God and credits common grace with endowing these gifts (200). This common grace of God is present in humanity partially to overcome the corrupted human nature. Common grace restrains that corruption of sin, not in order to cleanse, but in order to endow or maintain certain human aptitudes (189). Included in the benefits of this restraining grace of God as explicated by Calvin, according to Hoekema, is that "unbelievers may be clothed with God's excellent gifts" (190). Human strengths are part of God's creation gifts to all of humanity. Every person possesses a unique set of strengths. God desires people to use their strengths in his ministry to all persons. These strengths are manifest in all persons who are created in the image of God and are called into relationship with God and his people.

Wesley holds to a robust view of human sinfulness and the devastating effects of the Fall. According to Wesley, the Fall defaced the image of God. It was a fall from high heights, indeed, for Wesley. In his sermon "The Image of God," Wesley culminates his discussion of the pre-Fall image of God in humanity with a beautiful vision of perfection:

> The result of all these—an unerring understanding, an uncorrupt will, and perfect freedom - gave the last stroke to the image of God in man, by crowning all these with happiness. Then indeed to live was to enjoy, when every faculty was in its perfection, amidst abundance of objects which infinite wisdom purposely suited to it, when man's understanding was satisfied with truth, as his will was with good; when he was at full liberty to enjoy either the Creator or the creation; to indulge in rivers of pleasure, ever new, ever pure from any mixture of pain. (4: 295)

The issue becomes how much of the image remains following the Fall. Pseudo-Macarius, one of many thinkers Wesley utilized for his *Christian Library*, taught that only one part of what he posits as a twofold image of God was lost, the celestial image, that part of the image that facilitates communion with God. The natural image, having to do with free

will, is maintained, even if it is blinded due to the presence of sin (Kurowski 114-15). This position of Pseudo-Macarius and most of the eastern church denies total depravity, because humans preserve free will. Wesley rejected this analysis, believing instead that the Fall distorts if not destroys the whole image of God, upholding total depravity (Kurowski 120; K. Collins 81). Wesley consistently held that the whole image of God was negatively affected by the Fall. According to Wesley, the Fall completely destroyed the moral image and damaged the other facets of the image (Ayers 271; K. Collins 61-63). The most important aspect of this disagreement between Wesley and Pseudo-Macarius is the capacity for free will. For Pseudo-Macarius, this capacity survives the negative consequences of the Fall. Contrary to Pseudo-Macarius, Wesley believed free will is impossible without the assistance of prevenient grace (Kurowski 121). Wesley sees a remedy for the loss of the image because God graciously intervenes on behalf of humanity with this prevenient grace. Quoting from 1 John 1:9, Wesley interprets prevenient grace:

> If we take this in its utmost extent it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed "natural conscience," but more properly, "preventing grace"; all the "drawings" of "the Father," the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, in crease more and more; all that "light" wherewith the Son of God "enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world," showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God." (2: 156-57)

One can see in his use of the term, *preventing*, that Wesley is somewhat in agreement with Calvin in that persons experience this work of grace as the restraining of the full effects of the Fall. However, Wesley proposed a more vigorous emphasis on the restorative effects of grace and, importantly, he understands prevenient grace in primarily soteriological categories. While Wesley believed salvation is the gift of God and

maintained a belief in *sola gratia*, however he teaches that humans have a role to play in choosing to receive the grace of God. Human choosing results in God's beneficent offer of justifying grace.

Outler defines prevenient grace as "a special gracious activity of the Holy Spirit in the heart and will, always in anticipation (*praeveniens*) of any human initiative or act of choice" (156-57). The emphasis lies on guarding against any sense of human contribution to his or her salvation in order to maintain *sola gratia*. Any human good results purely from grace because of the Fall's devastating effects. No human work can be construed as good, morally speaking, without the initiation and participation of grace. Persons are fallen and sinful but are not beyond the grasp of grace. Practically speaking, no human exists who escapes the influence of grace, being raised out of the totally fallen state, the state of *nature*, and endowed with a certain amount of grace whether common or prevenient. Robert E. Cushman argues, "It is apparent Wesley makes no sharp divorcement between nature and grace, in the sense that man's *whole existence* is enveloped by the wooing activity of God" (emphasis mine, 110-11). Grace plays a role in restoring God's good gifts. If not, then total depravity must be seriously questioned.

Kenneth Collins notes that, for Wesley, the benefits of prevenient grace include the restoration of those elements in persons that are necessary for responsible personhood (81). Discussing the imagined person who is in the actual state of total depravity, Collins notes this person lacks "freedom, conscience, and therefore accountability, such a self, so it seems, lacks both subjectivity and agency, soteriologically speaking" (350). From a soteriological and anthropological standpoint, prevenient grace is necessary to restore in persons existing in such a state the ability to possess the capacity for responding to the

wooing activity of the Holy Spirit and to exercise free will to choose to draw nearer to God. This capacity for responding to God's gracious call may also include the good expression of human strengths if human strengths are conceptualized as the exercise of virtues as postulated by Seligman. Seeing strengths in this manner may place them more in line with the moral image of God due to the fact that the moral image is that part of the human person that is capable of relationship with God. Strengths would then be understood as an outgrowth of that relationship as God seeks to encourage and empower persons to serve his kingdom purposes. This speculation is beyond the scope of the current study but may warrant further inquiry as human strengths understood as God's good gifts at creation are conceptualized as an expression of God's continued restorative ministry of grace.

Wesley may well have altered his perception of the post-Fall, pre-grace state of humanity late in life. In his sermon, "Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels," written in 1790, he discusses "the remains of the image of God" that are present in fallen humanity. Wesley concedes that a degree of liberty, free will, and conscience lingers. Discussing these latent abilities, he writes, "Certainly, whether this is natural or superadded by the grace of God, it is found, at least in some degree, in every child of man" (4: 163). The important words in this statement are "natural" and "superadded." Natural refers to the state of fallen humanity (K. Collins 73) whereas superadded refers to that part of persons that are added to the natural person by the grace of God. If this degree of liberty, free will, and conscience is natural, then Wesley is altering his earlier view. If they are superadded, then Wesley continues his commitment to a non-Pseudo-Macarius position. Wesley at least opens the door to a position he had earlier rejected, making no argument

for or against these vestiges of the image, moving, even if ever so slightly, closer to the position of Pseudo-Macarius, whose views he had previously altered for his *Christian Library*.

A soteriology embracing a fuller impact of grace upon fallen humanity, or limiting the initial effects of original sin, points toward a different conception of personhood as a manifestation of the image of God:

> Man is called to preserve the image of God in him as much as possible, striving to free himself from the necessity of nature, experiencing "sacramentally" the "new being" as a member of the community of those "born again", and maintaining an eschatological vision and expectation of the transformation of the world. (Zizioulas, "On Being a Person" 44)

Human beings work toward the eschatological transformation, utilizing the talents and strengths that are an expression of their unique personhood.

Grace enables people to possess strengths and utilize those strengths to contribute towards the common good, even if this good is limited to "works meet for repentance" (Matt. 3:8, KJV). Because of the restoration of a measure of free will, the utilization of these strengths would not necessarily move individuals toward salvation, even though that free will is restored by God's irresistible grace. Nothing limits how persons use their strengths. An act of the intellect is an act of free will. They choose what to think and how to use their intellect. God freely endows persons, created in his image, with a unique set of human strengths, which are available to all, although people utilize their strengths to different degrees and for diverse ends.

The Eastern church articulates soteriology in terms of the relational restoration of humanity and the whole of creation with the Triune God. God shares God's life with humanity. Eastern theologians present salvation as the growth of a human person into

what God originally intended through the process of *theosis* (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* 211-12). Merton's anthropology is more consistent with this Eastern conception of soteriology: "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self" (*New Seeds* 31). Chrysostom, commenting on Romans 5:12, links the Fall to human mortality. He understands the Fall's primary effect, not as an inheritance of guilt but as the reality of the entrance of death into the human family (401). Emphasizing the Western understanding of the Fall and introducing either common or prevenient grace results in the same understanding: a unique person, created in the image of God, the image marred by sin's effects but partially restored, expressing the person's personality traits and strengths, though not fully redeemed, thus, not fully expressive of the wholeness God desires to produce in the person's life.

The doctrine of the Incarnation may be viewed through a different lens if the Fall has more to do with personhood versus a forensic apprehension of disobedience. The Incarnation does not depend on soteriology or on a doctrine of sin. The Incarnation may best be understood as an expression of the love of the Father, moving outside of himself in order to identify himself with his creation. The arrival of Jesus Christ in the world might still have occurred had sin not entered the story because of the relationality of God and God's desire to move outside himself in love (Ware 70). Humans, created in the image of God, carry within and through them the imprint of their Creator. This imprint is experienced in their unique and unrepeatable personhood and expressed through their personality traits, namely through their signature strengths. God's interaction with humanity, from creation to the Incarnation, results from the ecstatic grace of God.

Toward a Synthesis

Aristotle clearly influenced thought about human happiness in claiming all human activity aims toward the goal of *eudaimonia*. Long before Aristotle, the Old Testament articulated the concept in the ideals of *baruch* and *ashre* in Psalm 119:2. Human persons aspire to happiness. Practitioners of positive psychology point toward three broad areas of activities and experiences that enhance happiness: building and sustaining positive close relationships, engaging strengths in everyday activities, and adopting and maintaining an optimistic outlook on life. This study focused on engaging strengths in everyday activities, particularly equipping people to do so in ministry activities. I conceptualize strengths as part of the creation of human persons in the image of God. Human rebellion damaged the image to one degree or another, and strengths are God's good gifts to all persons, restored by grace. They are an expression of virtue and unique personhood, bestowed upon each person for building for God's kingdom. As leaders equip persons to engage their strengths in ministry activities, God blesses them with the abundant life that he intends for all of humanity.

Research Design

I used an explanatory, mixed-methods design in this study. Researchers employ a mixed-methods design when they need both quantitative and qualitative data to ascertain the results of a particular intervention and to determine what parts of the intervention were effective (Wiersma and Jurs 274-75). They utilize an explanatory, mixed-methods design when they collect qualitative data in order to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell 560).

Explanatory, Mixed-Methods Design as the Model for This Study

I chose an explanatory, mixed-methods design in this study because evaluating a change in psychological well-being, or happiness, using an assessment tool, alone, does not offer insight into what parts of the process aided or hindered a change in the happiness of participants. The Ryff Scales measured psychological well-being, but the semi-structured interview protocol yielded further understanding of the actual process involved in discovering and deploying strengths in ministry.

The literature review revealed that this study uncovered new ground for investigating processes for equipping people both for ministry and for experiencing the life God enables and desires for each child of God. I designed this project to discover if and how discovering one's strengths empowers people to experience more fulfilling lives.

Similar Studies Using an Explanatory, Mixed-Methods Design

Reniel Joel A. Nebab's 2009 dissertation used an explanatory, mixed-methods design to evaluate a leadership development program for organizational leaders in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Churches of the Philippines (CAMACP). Nebab collected data through questionnaires of pastoral leaders within the districts of the CAMACP to evaluate the effectiveness of a leadership development program he designed. He also utilized a researcher-designed, semi-structured interview protocol to glean further insights into the program.

In his study of health care leaders serving underserved populations, Michael Joseph Huckabee employed an explanatory, mixed-methods design to determine whether a high level of subjective well-being existed in leaders who exhibited an attitude of servant leadership. He used two quantitative inventories to collect data in order to discern

leadership attitude and spiritual well-being. He utilized semi-structured interviews in order to glean qualitative data to explore more in-depth the leaders' attitudes and their impact on subjective well-being.

Summary

The literature delineating the clergy and laity divide is wide and varied; however, little help is offered to clergy who desire to fulfill their biblical mandate to equip the saints for works of ministry. The literature review in this chapter points to an important means of filling in this gap in knowledge. The review unfolds an historical and theoretical connection between utilizing strengths and happiness as a potential process for encouraging laity to discover and utilize their strengths in their ministry settings, feeling empowered to do so because they understand these strengths as a part of the image of God with which God invested each human person. Positive psychologists have made tremendous strides within the last decade of moving the discussion in psychology from simply healing disease to enabling otherwise normal people to flourish and experience life in a higher functioning state.

A significant gap in the literature is evident. Little has been accomplished to connect the explorations of positive psychologists in optimal human functioning, which began as an exploration of Aristotelian philosophy, with a biblical theology of personhood, strengths, and happiness. I designed the strengths-based ministry process to equip laity by assisting them in a strengths-discovery and ministry implementation process.

I designed this explanatory, mixed-methods study by using the Ryff Scales and a semi-structured interview protocol to measure the change in psychological well-being of participants and to attempt to arrive at an understanding of that change.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem and Purpose

Too many people in too many churches sit on the sidelines observing others doing ministry, erroneously believing they have little to contribute. They miss the abundant life Jesus offers. Clergy, who take on too much of the burden of ministry, lack the tools to equip and deploy their people effectively according to the unique gifts, talents, and strengths God gave them. Instead, they resort to cookie-cutter approaches that are neither effective nor fulfilling for the volunteers or the people with whom ministry is performed. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact on psychological well-being of laypersons at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process.

Research Questions

I identified three research questions at the beginning of this project to evaluate the changes in psychological well-being of participants and to explain the portions of the process that were most effective in promoting that change.

Research Question #1

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being prior to the strengths-based ministry process?

I used the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to determine a baseline of psychological well-being prior to the subjects' participation in the strength-based ministry process.

Research Question #2

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being following the strengths-based ministry process, and what changes, if any, occurred?

I used the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to measure psychological well-being of participants following the strengths-based ministry process. I used this second measurement in order to determine the change in psychological well-being over the length of the study. The researcher designed semi-structured interview protocol included a question about the participants' perceived change in psychological well-being over the length of the study.

Research Question #3

What elements of the strengths-based ministry process—the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment, Serving with Your Strengths seminar, individualized coaching session, and ministry by strengths—contributed to the changes in the psychological well-being of the participants?

I designed a semi-structured interview protocol and administered it in order to gain insight into what portions of the strengths-based ministry process contributed to the changes in the psychological well-being of the participants during the study.

Population and Participants

The twenty participants in this study self-selected to enter by responding to a general invitation to participate in the strengths-based ministry process offered at Christ Church United Methodist Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church, in Versailles, Kentucky. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 64 years old. Twelve males and eight females participated in the study. Participants attended

a researcher-designed and led seminar held at either Christ Church or Versailles UMC. They also participated in an individualized strengths coaching session I led or led by one of four other strengths coaches. The participants' level of psychological well-being was measured both pre- and post-process using the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being. Following the post-process administration of the Ryff Scales, I conducted interviews with all twenty participants using a researcher-designed semi-structured interview protocol.

Design of the Study

The study utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. I used one quantitative method, a standardized questionnaire measuring six aspects of psychological well-being both prior to the strengths-based ministry process and after. To collect qualitative data, I designed a semi-structured interview protocol in order to determine what portions of the strengths-based ministry process were effective in increasing the psychological well-being of participants.

The project began with the invitation of persons from Christ Church United Methodist and Versailles United Methodist Church to participate in the strengths-based ministry process. I administered the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to participants prior to the process. They took the online Clifton StrengthsFinder® prior to the seminar, Serving with Your Strengths. The seminar at Christ Church was held on Sunday, 16 October 2011 from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the church. The seminar at Versailles UMC was held on 7 January 2012 from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Each participant attended a separate individualized coaching session led by a strengths coach to assist them to integrate their newly discovered strengths into their lives, careers, and ministry. I

administered the Ryff Scales a second time at least thirty days following the coaching session. I completed a semi-structured interview with each participant following the end of the process.

The last phase of the project involved analyzing the data. I analyzed the results of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales using descriptive statistical methods, comparing the pre- and post-process results. Participants reported results from the Clifton StrengthsFinder®. The process by which those results are analyzed is proprietary. Other coaches and I used the results in discussing each participant's strengths and how they might utilize them in ministry. I analyzed the results of the semi-structured interviews using open, axial, and selective coding. I reported the findings of the study collected through the analysis of the data.

Instrumentation

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® tool was administered through The Gallup Organization. It was developed in cooperation with Selection Research Incorporated, headed by Dr. Donald Clifton, and is primarily used by human resources departments of major corporations in screening new personnel. With the publication of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* in 2001 (Buckingham and Clifton), Gallup made the StrengthsFinder® available online to a much larger audience.

On the quantitative side, I used a standardized questionnaire, the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales, immediately prior to the strengths-based ministry process in order to determine the baseline psychological well-being of the participants. I used it a second time, following the process. The difference between the two measures determined the changes in psychological well-being of the participants.

I designed a semi-structured interview protocol, the Process Effectiveness Questionnaire, in order to attempt to discern what parts of the process were most effective in empowering people to experience greater life satisfaction, spiritual wholeness, and psychological well-being, what I refer to in this study as happiness. I recorded all interviews using a digital recording device. I then transcribed them into the computer program Transcriva.

Variables

This study included one independent variable, the strengths-based ministry process at Christ Church. The primary dependent variable is the change in level of psychological well-being, self-reported, using the questionnaire.

A variety of intervening variables could influence participants' psychological well-being over the three months between the first and second measurements. Some factors prove more obvious; others not. One of the possible variables weighing in a major negative impact on happiness is the death of a loved one. While Christ followers contextualize death in more healthy ways than do nonbelievers, a major loss by anyone, no matter how spiritually and emotionally mature one happens to be, negatively impacts a person's ability to be happy for any length of time at all. Any negative life event decreases one's possibilities for experiencing happiness, so any number of things can negatively impact the study results. Other intervening variables included knowledge of strengths, ministry involvement, and the degree to which participants deployed their strengths in ministry activities.

Reliability and Validity

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is an online assessment tool utilized by the Gallup Organization. It consists of 180-item pairs developed by Selection Research Incorporated and Gallup over a thirty-year period, measuring thirty-four talent themes. Coefficient alphas for the thirty-four talents measured ranged from 0.55 to 0.81 and test-retest correlations were above 0.70 (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 6).

I used the shorter version of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales. The original design of the scales covers six different components of psychological well-being, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The scales measure each component employing twenty questions using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The twenty-item scales have internal consistency (alpha) coefficients between 0.86 and 0.93. Test and retest reliability over a six-week period ranged between 0.81 and 0.88. The shorter version is a fourteen-item scale. This version is the version Ryff currently uses in her studies. Internal consistency (alpha) coefficients for the shorter version ranged from 0.83 to 0.91. Correlations between the shorter scales and the original, longer scales ranged from 0.97 to 0.98. The shorter version covers the same six components of psychological well-being but does so using fourteen items per component. Two of Ryff's studies establish the validity of the scale, and since then, researchers have used it in a variety of studies ("Happiness"; Ryff and Essex).

To verify the validity of the results of the semi-structured interviews, I shared the transcripts of the interviews with the participants to determine if those transcripts

accurately captured their original intent. When discrepancies were discovered, I altered the transcripts to reflect the participants' feedback.

Data Collection

Before participants took the online StrengthsFinder® assessment, I administered the first round of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales in order to establish a baseline of psychological well-being for each person in the study. This test is an eighty-four item, six-point Likert questionnaire covering six components of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Of the many available assessment tools to measure psychological well-being, subjective well-being, and happiness, this tool is a widely disseminated and balanced approach to measuring human happiness.

Immediately prior to the seminar, participants took the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment online in order to determine their top five signature talents. If people develop their talents by increasing skills and knowledge, they can grow talents into strengths. Participants brought the reports of their top five talents to the seminar, shared them with the larger group as part of the discussion, and used them in their individualized coaching sessions.

I developed and taught the seminar, Serving with Your Strengths, at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church, in Versailles, Kentucky. I led the seminar at Christ Church on Sunday, 16 October 2011 from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. At Versailles UMC, I led the seminar on Saturday, 7 January 2012, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. In the seminar, I taught biblical material concerning gifts, talents, strengths, and the uniqueness of each human being

created in the image of God. The purpose of the seminar was to set in the proper context the potential of developing each person's strengths in order to equip him or her for ministry and higher levels of psychological well-being.

Within two weeks following the seminar, each person participated in an individualized coaching session with a trained strengths coach. A coaching session generally lasted one hour. In the session, the participant and coach discussed each of their top five talents and the interaction among their unique set of talents and created an action plan in order to develop their talents into strengths and deploy them in ministry activities through the local church.

Approximately ninety days following the initial coaching session, I administered the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales a second time to measure the level of psychological well-being of the participant following process. I then interviewed each participant using a semi-structured interview protocol to determine which parts of the strengths-based ministry process were effective.

Data Analysis

I used descriptive statistical methods to analyze the data from both the pre-process and post-process Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales in order to determine the changes of participants' levels of psychological well-being. I used open, axial, and selective coding to analyze the data from the semi-structured interviews. I coded the responses into categories in order to determine what parts, if any, of the strengths-based ministry process were effective in enabling participants to experience higher levels of psychological well-being.

Ethical Procedures

Prior to the strengths-based ministry process, I obtained informed consent from each participant using an informed consent form. I informed participants that each would remain anonymous, their data would be stored in a secure location, and interview recordings were maintained in encrypted password-protected digital files. The data is presented in aggregate form, and none of the participants' identities has been disclosed to any other party beside myself.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Problem and Purpose

To experience the abundant life Jesus offers to all of his followers, laity must remove themselves from the sidelines where many have been observing the clergy doing ministry because they erroneously believe they have little to offer and use the talents, gifts, and strengths God gave them to do the works of ministry for which he created them. The study sought to address the problem of equipping laypersons for ministry using their God-given talents.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact on laypersons' psychological well-being at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process.

Participants

The current sample of twenty subjects included twelve men and eight women. Their mean age was 45.45 years (SD = 10.77). The sample was mostly Caucasian (n = 18; 90 percent), with one African participant and one Asian participant. Subjects were self-selected to participate in the strengths-based ministry process offered at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Participants' Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	Age	Race
1	Female	42	Caucasian
2	Female	50	Caucasian
3	Male	31	Asian
4	Male	43	Caucasian
5	Male	45	Caucasian
6	Female	46	Caucasian
7	Male	39	Caucasian
8	Female	37	Caucasian
9	Female	39	Caucasian
10	Male	55	Caucasian
11	Male	34	African
12	Female	38	Caucasian
13	Male	38	Caucasian
14	Male	59	Caucasian
15	Male	64	Caucasian
16	Male	49	Caucasian
17	Female	57	Caucasian
18	Female	61	Caucasian
19	Male	57	Caucasian
20	Male	25	Caucasian

Research Question #1

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being prior to the strengths-based ministry process? I used the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales to determine a baseline of psychological well-being prior to the subjects' participation in the strength-based ministry process. This first administration of the Ryff Scales represents the pretest results.

The mean and standard deviation were computed for the pretest total score of the Ryff Scales. The mean response of all subjects was 4.69 with a standard deviation of 0.62. Means and standard deviations were also computed for each of the subscales of the Ryff Scales at the pretest administration. At pre-process, mean responses for all subscales ranged between 4 (agree slightly) and 5 (agree somewhat). Some significant differences existed between responses to the subscales. The autonomy score (M = 4.40; SD = 0.84) was significantly lower than the personal growth score (M = 4.96; SD = 0.54; t [19] = -3.99, p = .001), and the purpose in life score (M = 4.89; SD = 0.73; t [19] = -2.70; p = .014). In addition, the environmental mastery score (M = 4.46, SD = 0.77) was significantly lower than the personal growth score (M = 4.96, SD = 0.54; t [19] = -3.03; p = .007), the positive relations with others score (M = 4.77, SD = 0.86; t [19] = -2.76; p = .012), and the purpose in life score (M = 4.89, SD = 0.73; t [19] = -2.69; p = .015; see Table 4.2).

Research Question #2

How did participants rate their level of psychological well-being following the strengths-based ministry process, and what changes, if any, occurred? I used the Ryff Scales to measure participants' psychological well-being following the strengths-based ministry process. I used this second measurement in order to determine the change in psychological well-being over the length of the study.

Participants' scores on the posttest administration of the Ryff Scales indicated a significant change from their pretest scores. The posttest total score (M = 4.91; SD = 0.56) was significantly higher than the pretest total score (M = 4.69, SD = 0.62; t [19] =

-5.45; $p = .000$). This difference indicates a significant effect on psychological well-being resulting from the strengths-based ministry process.

Means and standard deviations were also computed for posttest scores on the subscales of the Ryff Scales (see Table 4.2). At posttest, mean responses for all subscales ranged between 4.5 and 5.2. Again, some significant differences existed between responses to the subscales. The autonomy score (M = 4.60; SD = 0.92) was significantly lower than the personal growth score (M = 5.12; SD = 0.60; t [19] = -2.97; $p = .008$), the purpose in life score (M = 5.09; SD = 0.67; t [19] = -2.72; $p = .014$), and the self-acceptance score (M = 5.04; SD = 0.65; t [19] = -2.17, $p = .043$). In addition, the environmental mastery score (M = 4.76; SD = 0.69) was significantly lower than the purpose in life score (M = 5.09; SD = 0.67; t [19] = -2.33; $p = .031$), and the self-acceptance score (M = 5.04; SD = 0.65; t [19] = -2.52; $p = .021$). Finally, the positive relations with others score (M = 4.77; SD = 0.86) was significantly lower than the purpose in life score (M = 5.09; SD = 0.67; t [19] = 20.28; $p < .001$). The Ryff Scales showed fair internal reliability at posttest with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69.

A series of dependent samples *t*-tests explored any changes in scores on the Ryff subscales from before to after the strengths-based ministry process. Overall the Ryff total scores did change significantly from pre- (M = 4.69; SD = 0.62) to post-test (M = 4.91; SD = 0.56; t [19] = -5.45; $p < .001$). In addition, there were significant changes from pre- to posttest on four of the six subscales. The self acceptance subscale showed the greatest change from, pre- (M = 4.66, SD = 0.94) to post-test (M = 5.04; SD = 0.65; t [19] = -3.60; $p = .002$; see Table 4.2 for the significant differences).

Table 4.2. Pre- and Post-Process Ryff Scales

	Pre-Process M (SD)	Post-Process M (SD)	Change	*t* (df)	*p*
Autonomy	4.40 (0.84)	4.60 (0.92)	0.20	-2.03 (19)	.057
Environmental mastery	4.46 (0.77)	4.76 (0.69)	0.30	-4.27 (19)	.000
Personal growth	4.96 (0.54)	5.12 (0.60)	0.16	-2.41 (19)	.026
Positive relations with others	4.77 (0.86)	4.86 (0.94)	0.09	-1.21 (19)	.243
Purpose in life	4.89 (0.73)	5.09 (0.67)	0.20	-2.70 (19)	.014
Self-acceptance	4.66 (0.94)	5.04 (0.65)	0.38	-3.60 (19)	.002
TOTAL	4.69 (0.62)	4.91 (0.56)	0.22	-5.45 (19)	.000

Table 4.3 shows the correlation coefficients for the pre- and post-test scores on each subscale of the Ryff Scales. All of the pretest scores appear strongly positively correlated with the posttest scores for that factor, with Pearson product moment correlation coefficients ranging from .86 to .96 ($p < .001$). The intercorrelations among the subscales are varied. For example, autonomy time 1 is significantly related to personal growth time 1, ($r = .67$; $p = .05$), purpose in life time 1 ($r = .46$; $p = .05$), and purpose in life time 2 ($r = .58$; $p = .01$).

Table 4.3. Correlations for Pre- and Posttest Scores on the Ryff Scales (N =20)

	Pretest	Posttest	Autonomy 1	Autonomy 2	Environmental mastery 1	Environmental mastery 2	Personal growth 1	Personal growth 2	Positive relations with others 1	Positive relations with others 2	Purpose in life 1	Purpose in life 2	Self-acceptance 1	Self-acceptance 2
Pretest	1	.96**	.60**	.53*	.83**	.78**	.75**	.46*	.79**	.83**	.87**	.86**	.89**	.83**
Posttest		1	.66**	.65**	.76**	.76**	.81**	.58**	.68**	.75**	.83**	.90	.82**	.88**
Autonomy 1			1	.87**	.29	.34	.67**	.54*	.17	.24	.47*	.58**	.31	.36
Autonomy 2				1	.19	.24	.64**	.54*	.13	.18	.47*	.54*	.31	.36
Environ-mental mastery 1						1	.41	.06	.74**	.82**	.52*	.57**	.69**	.71**
Environ-mental mastery 2						1	.41	.06	.74**	.82**	.52*	.57**	.69**	.71**
Personal growth 1							1	.86**	.34	.37	.76**	.83**	.54*	.64**
Personal growth 2								1	.01	.05	.52*	.64**	.33	.49*
Positive relations with others 1									1	.95**	.57**	.55*	.71**	.57**
Positive relations with others 2										1	.58**	.57**	.78**	.68**
Purpose in life 1											1	.90**	.82**	.80**
Purpose in life 2												1	.72**	.80**
Self-acceptance 1													1	.88**
Self-acceptance 2														1

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**
***. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).**

To explore the changes in the Ryff Scales scores over time between men and women, a series of 2x2 repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. While both men and women showed higher overall scores over time (F [1, 18] = 35.97; $p < .001$), no significant gender differences on any of the subscales or in the total score occurred.

Research Question #3

What elements of the strengths-based ministry process—the Gallup StrengthsFinder® assessment, Serving with Your Strengths seminar, individualized coaching session, and ministry by strengths—contributed to the changes in the psychological well-being of the participants? I designed a semi-structured interview protocol and administered it in order to gain insight into what portions of the strengths-based ministry process contributed to the change in psychological well-being of the participants during the study.

The most prominent element of the process that contributed to the increase in psychological well-being among the participants as reported in their interviews was the individualized coaching session. Ten of the twenty participants explicitly noted the coaching session as being the most helpful. Participant 4 stated, "The coaching in particular just brought it all home. I think that was the most beneficial aspect to actually talk about it with someone." Participant 19 said that the coaching session "was incredibly affirming to me." Table 4.4 tabulates the different answers to this question.

The StrengthsFinder® Assessment, itself, was the second most common answer to the question of which element of the process was most helpful. Participant 11 indicated that reading his StrengthsFinder® results "was very uplifting, and it did strengthen my inner being and my sense of purpose in life." Six of the twenty participants listed the assessment and subsequent learning about their personal strengths as the most beneficial. Two participants indicated the seminar was the most helpful component of the strengths-based ministry process (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Most Helpful Element of the Strengths-Based Ministry Process (N=20)

Process Element	*n*
Coaching Session	10
StrengthsFinder®	6
Seminar	2
Other	2

I designed the questionnaire to elicit responses to other questions that shed further light on the effectiveness of the strengths-based ministry process in both equipping persons for ministry and increasing their sense of psychological well-being. I particularly inquired about the effectiveness of the seminar, the coaching session, and any change participants' experienced in ministry participation because of the process.

Seventeen of the twenty participants, responding to a question about the effectiveness of the seminar, spoke of it in positive terms. Participant 3 responded to the seminar positively:

> I really liked the part where you talked about if we try extremely hard at something we're not gifted at, we'll be mediocre at best, but if we put effort into our strengths, we can be excellent, we can be great. That was really good for me to hear.

Three participants responded with language that is neutral or negative concerning the seminar. Participant 15 stated, "The seminar confused me, mostly." None of the three participants offering neutral or negative remarks about the seminar had completed the StrengthsFinder® assessment prior to attending the seminar; thus, they lacked important context for understanding the content of the seminar. The process was designed to encourage participants first to complete the assessment before attending the seminar (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Responses to the Seminar (N=20)

Response Quality	*n*
Positive	17
Neutral	2
Negative	1

Eighteen participants indicated the individualized coaching session had a beneficial effect. In speaking of the coaching session, Participant 3 stated, “It made me feel good about myself.” Participant 1 said, “The coaching session was my favorite part of the process.” Participant 18 remarked, “[The coaching session] gave me a lot more confidence, and encouraged me to continue doing what I’m doing.” Two neutral responses from participants concerning the coaching session and no negative responses were observed.

Responding to a question concerning any change in ministry participation following the process, nineteen participants indicated a positive change in either their level of ministry participation or the quality of their participation. Twelve participants indicated their level of involvement was the same but that they had experienced an increase in effectiveness. Seven participants responded that they had increased his or her level of service in ministry, with one beginning a new ministry and one indicating their increased participation was also marked by an increase in quality (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Level of Ministry Participation Change (N=20)

Level of Ministry Participation, from Pre- to Post Process	*n*
Same	1
Same with higher quality	12
Increased	5
Increased with new ministry	1
Increased with higher quality	1

Summary of Major Findings

The study of the strengths-based ministry process produced four major findings that I discuss in Chapter 5:

1. The strengths-based ministry process produced a significant increase in psychological well-being in the participants.

2. The largest and most significant increases in the Ryff subscales were evidenced in self-acceptance and environmental mastery.

3. Participants credited their individualized coaching sessions as making the largest contribution to their increase in psychological well-being.

4. Participants reported both an increased level of participation and effectiveness in ministry activities.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact on psychological well-being of laypersons at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process.

To experience the abundant life Jesus offers his followers, laity must become active in ministry and not simply observe clergy perform ministry. Both clergy and laity erroneously believe the average person in the pew has little to offer except the contents of their wallets. God created people for works of service in the church and world, and he desires that everyone, clergy and laity alike, use the talents, gifts, and strengths he gave them to do works of ministry. The study sought to address the problem of equipping laypersons for ministry using their God-given talents.

Positive Impact on Well-Being of the Strengths Process

The participants in the study revealed a significant increase in psychological well-being as measured by difference between the pre- and post-process administration of the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being. The mean response of all subjects for the pre-process administration was 4.69 with a standard deviation of 0.62. This score falls in the upper half of the Ryff Scales, which are scored from 1 to 6. The post-process score was a mean response of 4.91 with a standard deviation of 0.56. The *p*-value was .000, indicating a highly significant increase from pre- to post-process. Even though the group

scored relatively high on the Ryff Scales prior to the process, participants exhibited a significant increase in psychological well-being.

Particularly among the participants whom I coached, I observed this increase in psychological well-being as persons were moved by the application of their learning about their unique set of strengths and the utilization of them in ministry. Participants approached me at various times during and after the process to report about their growth in strengths and utilization of strengths in ministry. During the administration of the post-process interviews, I also observed the excitement with which persons shared from their experiences about the effectiveness of the process in empowering them in their sense of self and confidence in ministry.

I was intrigued by the fact that in the interviews following the process, only nine of the twenty participants indicated they believed they experienced an increase in psychological well-being. The others indicated no change. The data from the Ryff Scales indicated that nineteen of twenty participants scored higher and one participant actually decreased in the Ryff Scales measure. I believe the discrepancy between actual increase as measured by the Ryff Scales and perceived increase as indicated in the interviews is that participants may have believed the question was posing a causal relationship and they may not have possessed the self-awareness to understand this relationship. Participants' responses to interview questions concerning the coaching and ministry involvement reveal a much more positive response, indicating the process was effective in its goals.

The finding of an increase in psychological well-being is supported in the research. Carr, summarizing the conclusions of positive psychology research, lists

exercising strengths on a regular basis in work and leisure activities as one of three broad categories of reliable means by which people achieve an optimal level of psychological well-being (348). Csikszentmihalyi's research indicates that the more time persons spend engaging their strengths in what he refers to as the flow state, the higher levels of psychological well-being they experience (49). Regularly engaging strengths in ministry most likely had the effect of increasing time in flow.

Seligman includes utilizing strengths as the key to experiencing what he calls the "Good Life" and the "Meaningful Life." A person can enjoy Seligman's "Good Life" by using his or her strengths to experience abundant and authentic gratification, but the "Meaningful Life," a higher way of living, according to him, is gained by applying strengths toward something larger than the self ("Happiness" 249). Seligman carries forward his emphasis on a meaningful life in his work on human flourishing. As the discipline matures, researchers are discovering that psychological well-being involves deeper dimensions of living than can be experienced in a purely self-focused life, though positive thoughts about the self are necessary to reach the more self-transcendent categories of serving a greater good (*Flourish* 299-300). If a person discovers a fundamental truth about themselves, their talents and strengths, and then utilizes those strengths in ministry, a self-transcendent activity, then a higher level of self, meaning, and well-being ensues.

One of the primary messages communicated in the Serving with Your Strengths seminar was the biblical reality that God's desire for humans is their happiness, not happiness in the sense of a buoyant, cheery mood, but rather in the deep sense of well-being that is communicated by the biblical notion the abundant life (John 10:10). The

logic of happiness and well-being applies equally to Wesley's conviction that happiness and holiness are closely related, if not identical (Outler 81-84).

The biblical and theological framework worked out in Chapter 2, reveals that God created persons with the express purpose of doing good works that he prepared from the beginning and that these good works are consistent with the unique way in which he created persons as his *poiema* (Eph. 2:10). In the seminar, I introduced these concepts. They are reinforced in the coaching session. When persons come to an understanding about themselves that includes strengths as God's gifts for God's purposes, and the abundant life to which they are called, and they are coached in how to utilize those gifts, then they would experience an increase in psychological well-being. The data demonstrates this.

The study reveals that helping people discover their strengths and encouraging them to utilize their strengths in a ministry setting, in essence, equipping the saints for ministry using strengths, is an effective means of both increasing participation and effectiveness in ministry but also in assisting persons to encounter a fuller and richer experience of life. The study presents manifold implications for ministry. Pastors and other ministry leaders can implement the strengths-based ministry process in order to empower laity in to engage their God-given strengths in service to others, increasing ministry participation and effectiveness and enabling the persons who engage their strengths to experience happier, wholistic, and satisfying lives.

Largest Impact in Self-Acceptance and Environmental Mastery

Of the six Ryff subscales, the strengths-based ministry process most influenced self-acceptance and Environmental Mastery. I did not anticipate this result; however, a

certain logic exists between discovering and deploying one's strengths in ministry and higher levels of self-acceptance and environmental mastery, as defined by Ryff. I instructed strengths coaches to affirm participants' strengths as positive parts of their personalities. In general, the higher the level of a person's self-awareness, the easier the person can embrace strengths as a key component of his or her personhood. In my coaching experience, most of the participants possessed a positive sense of self and were ready to embrace the results of the StrenghtsFinder® assessment. As they were coached, most participants, if not all, were able to affirm their strengths and perceive those strengths positively. The fact that participants acknowledged the coaching session as the most effective component of the strengths-based ministry process and the fact that affirmation of strengths and self served as a primary goal of the coaching session reinforces the logic of the results pointing to the significant positive impact on self-acceptance of the participants.

Ryff and Singer argue that self-acceptance "is a kind of self-evaluation that is long-term and involves awareness, and acceptance of, both personal strengths and weaknesses" (20-21). In the seminar, I addressed both these aspects of well-being, the fact that each person has both strengths and weaknesses. Gaining an awareness of both proves necessary. However, persons must emphasize strengths by spending a majority of their time growing and working in areas of strengths while minimizing the time spent working in areas of weakness. The coaching session emphasized these truths, both of which are present in the literature, particularly Drucker and Seligman (Drucker 71-72, 98; Seligman, *Flourish* 726-27).

If strengths are understood as expressions of the uniqueness of persons whose primary identity is that of a children of God created in the image of God, resulting from the Divine Artisan's creativity, then a higher degree of self-acceptance as persons embrace this unique part of themselves would be expected (Gen. 1:27-28; Eph. 2:10). If, however, persons spend most of their energy and time on shoring up weaknesses, parts of their person that are not necessarily a reflection of the good creation God made them to be, then a decreased level of self-acceptance would be expected. The strengths-based ministry process emphasizes the uniqueness and goodness of the persons as expressions of God's creative activity. When persons accept this truth about themselves, they achieve a higher sense of self.

Ryff's environmental mastery is more nuanced and the connection seems more difficult between this subscale and strengths. She describes a person with a high degree of environmental mastery as one who "has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values" ("Happiness" 1072). She also notes that environmental mastery includes "the capacity to manage effectively one's life and surrounding world" (Ryff and Keyes 720). Conversely, a person who scores low in environmental mastery "has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world" (Ryff, "Happiness" 1072). Unpacking Ryff's definitions of environmental mastery helps reveal a connection between this subcategory of psychological well-being and strengths.

As persons gain a greater understanding of their own personalities as expressed in their strengths and feel empowered to participate in ministry activities through the coaching intervention, they may experience a greater sense of control over their lives than they previously felt. Environmental mastery indicates a person who feels in control rather than manipulated by or the victim of their life circumstances, surroundings, and the influence of others. If a person feels empowered to be an actor rather than merely acted upon, then his or her sense of overall well-being increases. Arriving at a higher degree of self-awareness and empowerment about the difference people can make in their environment and lives through discovering strengths and being affirmed and encouraged to utilize those strengths in individualized coaching sessions should influence this subcategory of environmental mastery.

As with the first major finding, the implications of this finding are important for ministry. Moving beyond simply self-esteem, persons who recognize their unique talents and strengths and utilize them in ministry and who subsequently sense a greater experience of self-acceptance and environmental mastery will experience a greater motivation to participate in ministry activities than those who have yet to understand these truths about themselves and their ability to positively influence their surroundings. Simply feeling good about the self is favorable, however, feeling good about the self because a person has embraced the reality of his or her strengths being important for ministry is much better.

Significant Impact of Coaching

Participants reported in the interviews that the individualized coaching session impacted their sense of psychological well-being more than other components of the

process. Ten of the twenty participants explicitly cited the coaching session as the most effective part of the process in increasing their level of psychological well-being. One participant stated that the coaching session was the most beneficial part of the process because of its personalized nature. In response to the question concerning how the coaching session was effective or ineffective, eighteen of the twenty participants assessed the coaching positively using words like: helpful, encouraged, effective, reaffirmation, incredibly affirming, most beneficial, and awesome.

I did not explore coaching in the literature or in the biblical and theological background of the study. I built it into the process because I believed coaching had the potential to assist participants integrate the biblical and theological understanding of strengths presented in the seminar into their personal lives and ministry. Abstract ideas, if integrated pragmatically into a person's life, need to be personalized. I designed the coaching session to empower people to affirm their strengths. Affirming strengths counters the remedial mind-set of society (Buckingham and Clifton 3-4). People experience far more benefit from focusing on strengths rather than trying to correct weaknesses (Seligman, *Flourish* 726-27). Because this reality runs so counter to the cultural focus on shoring up weakness, finding expression in schools, churches, governments, and workplaces, coaching people in strengths seems to have a maximal impact.

This message is consistent with the positive message Jesus offers concerning the quality of life God desires his people to experience as opposed to the suffering and death the enemy promotes in John 10:10. If God is bullish on life and the possible life he wants persons to experience, then persons, themselves, ought to be more positive in general.

Wesley taught this inseparable link between happiness and holiness (Outler 65-88), so coaching persons to become more fully the persons God created them to be empowers them to experience an increase in wellness of heart, soul, and mind.

The study informs the practice of ministry concerning personalized coaching. Coaches affirm the individual's strengths and encourage him or her to employ strengths in the service of others, in order to experience the power of affirmation and further God's kingdom purposes (Matt. 25:14-30). Coaching helps persons in ministry actualize their inherent talents, God's creation gifts, in ministry settings where they observe immediate results, both interior, as they experience flow and how that ministry is effective in blessing others.

Increase of Ministry Participation and Perceived Effectiveness

The study revealed increased ministry participation and perceived effectiveness in ministry by the participants. Nineteen participants reported a positive impact of the strengths-based ministry process on their ministry involvement. Thirteen participants reported a sense of greater effectiveness in ministry because they gained an improved comprehension of the function of their strengths function in ministry because of the process.

The study found in the interviews support for the literature review, particularly Csikszentmihalyi's understanding concerning the connection between the use of strengths and flow experiences. He focused on flow at work and pointed to the lack of flow during leisure activities as a key explanation why so few find life satisfaction in leisure activities (157-36). This part of the study can be especially helpful to churches in assessing and deploying persons for ministry based on their strengths rather than simply the volunteer

slots they need filled. Persons who utilize their strengths discover more satisfaction, greater participation, and effectiveness in ministry activities. If people simply fill volunteer slots, then they will miss the sense of accomplishment and contribution they make toward the kingdom of God.

Persons often do not feel a sense of empowerment for ministry, believing ministry activities are the particular purview of clergy and other professional ministry specialists. The strengths-based ministry process encouraged laity to own their strengths and their potential effectiveness in ministry. The study realized this desired outcome.

In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul writes that Christ has given the gifts of persons whose work involves the interpretation and proclamation of the Word of God and these persons are to equip the people of God for ministry. The strengths-based ministry process serves as a means by which pastors and teachers can equip and empower persons under their care to do the works of ministry they are particularly gifted to do and experience a greater sense of effectiveness in those tasks.

Implications of the Findings

The study established a biblical and theological framework through which to understand strengths in the context of ministry and equip laity for ministry using these strengths as God-given creation gifts. The study demonstrated that persons who discover their strengths gain a personal understanding of those strengths as intended by God for his purposes feel a greater sense of satisfaction with life and experience an increased motivation for and effectiveness in ministry. The strengths-based ministry process helps bridge the clergy-laity gulf and overcome the Pareto principle, also known as the 80-20 rule.

Implications of this study are not limited to Christ Church and Versailles United Methodist Church but apply to other United Methodist churches, to other Protestant churches, and to Roman Catholic churches. These churches are composed of individuals who, to a greater or lesser degree, perceive themselves not to be gifted nor equipped for ministry. In order for pastors and other ministry professionals to discover the benefits of such a study, they will need to be willing to release ministry to the laity and rediscover their role in equipping the saints for the work of ministry rather than simply doing the work of their ministries. Pastors and leaders can easily adapt the strengths-based ministry process in a variety of different churches and ministry organizations. The primary limiting factor would be the adequate training of strengths coaches.

The impact of such an implementation of this process could be very positive. As more laypersons experience affirmation that their strengths are useful, even vital, for ministry, churches could accomplish further ministry and release more people to experience the abundant life Jesus offers. I have already trained several United Methodist pastors in the theory and implementation of the strengths-based ministry process. I led a seminar in a neighboring district and received an invitation to teach the principles found in this study to one of the flagship churches in the conference. As opportunities arise, I hope to continue to extend the benefits of this study to other churches.

Limitations of the Study

Beginning the process of this study, I feared falling short of recruiting enough participants to result in statistically significant outcomes. My fears proved to be unwarranted. However, after completing the data collection, including the interviews, additional questions most likely would have proved helpful. For instance, digging into the

reasons why a difference exists between the actual change in psychological well-being as demonstrated in the Ryff Scales and the interview responses to the initial inquiry about the difference between perceived psychological well-being prior to and following the strengths-based ministry process. In addition, dissecting the coaching protocol would have proved useful in order to gain insight into what techniques used in the coaching session produced the positive responses in the participants.

A limitation of the study was that most participants were already engaged in ministry activities prior to the process. Although the data demonstrates that even these persons, who were already involved in service, experienced increased participation and perceived effectiveness in ministry, the study of a group of persons who lacked initial ministry commitment would offer further insight into the effectiveness of the strengths-based ministry process.

Unexpected Observations

The study findings that the self-acceptance and environmental mastery subscales of the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being were most influenced was unexpected. I expected scores in the Purpose in Life and Personal Growth subscales to exhibit the greatest increase. I thought the discovery and utilization of strengths would affect these two areas because, prior to the process, most participants may not have received explicit teaching concerning these areas and they would perhaps sense a calling to engage in ministry during the seminar. Purpose in Life and Personal Growth seemed to be the logical places for the greatest impact.

The study observed the largest and most significant increases in the areas of self-acceptance and environmental mastery, which made sense when I more fully reflected on

this result, especially in light of the impact of the coaching session. When persons discover their unique set of strengths and those strengths are affirmed, they should sense a greater sense of self as created in the image of God, which should, in turn, lead to higher levels of self-acceptance. Participants' perceived sense of control over their life situations due to the utilization of their strengths should lead to higher levels of environmental mastery. The data demonstrated these results.

A small serendipity was the fact that six participants explicitly mentioned in their interviews that one of the important things they learned through the process included information shared in the seminar about weaknesses. A significant portion, 30 percent, of the participants noted the magnitude of the teaching that working on weaknesses generally proves futile in personal growth efforts. In the interview questions, I included no explicit reference to weaknesses. Participant 8, in response to an inquiry about the most impactful portion of the process stated, "So often we dwell on our faults and weaknesses, and it was nice to focus for a while on some strengths and what we can do to maximize those." This idea that I taught in the seminar several months earlier about working on one's strengths instead of weaknesses resonated with these persons and made a significant impact. In participant 13's response to what part of the process was most effective, he mentioned this element of the seminar as being the most impactful on his experience of psychological well-being.

Recommendations

The study demonstrates consequences for similar churches. The decline in the church in the West may partially be attributable to a consumer-driven approach to ministry in which clergy are producers and laity are consumers of ministry. I explicate a

biblical approach to ministry with an emphasis on equipping the saints so their gifts and strengths are recognized and utilized to impact the world. God's creation of individuals in his image, his endowing of them with creation gifts, and his expectation that the uniqueness of each person is to be expressed in individualized kingdom assignments all point to a much more engaged laity. The strengths-based ministry process proved effective in equipping people for ministry using their unique set of God-given strengths and empowering increased levels of and effectiveness of ministry participation.

The study offers insight into positive pastoral counseling practices. Counselors can encourage persons presenting themselves with an impaired perception of self and low sense of psychological well-being to participate in a strengths-based ministry process, gaining a greater degree of self-awareness and self-acceptance and experiencing the positive benefits of the utilization of their strengths in ministry, bringing them into alignment with God's call to engage in kingdom ministry. The process is engaged, not only to benefit the self, but to benefit the body of Christ.

Denominational leaders could benefit from the findings of the study. They can implement a strengths-based ministry process as part of their ongoing efforts to equip laity for ministry and leadership. The process would also be helpful in freeing clergy to empower laity to utilize the strengths God has given them for God's intended purposes, instead of seeing laity as primarily consumers of ministry produced by clergy.

A follow-up study would be beneficial in order to investigate best practices for strengths coaching and discern how those practices assist individuals involved and increase ministry participation and effectiveness. Another potential study might focus

solely on persons who are not currently involved in ministry activities to explore the effectiveness in launching persons into active service using their strengths.

Clergy and other professional ministers may explore using a strengths-based ministry process tailored to them. This process would be designed to inform clergy philosophically, psychologically, biblically, and theologically about God's creation gifts, their strengths. Clergy would utilize the StrengthsFinder® assessment for themselves and that knowledge would inform them on how to build ministry teams who would complement their strengths by deploying the strengths of laity in ministry in partnership with clergy to accomplish the work of the kingdom of God.

Postscript

Dr. Randy Jessen, then Dean of the Beeson International Center at Asbury Theological Seminary, asked if I had a project in mind if I was accepted into the Beeson Pastor Program. I did. Just prior to beginning the program, I learned about my own strengths and was excited about the possibilities of persons utilizing their strengths for ministry, being empowered to serve in areas of talent instead of simply filling slots in a church organizational chart. As time moved on and the project came to fruition, I hoped the strengths-based ministry process would produce positive empirical results, but I was completely surprised by how positive those results are. I have learned much about strengths, how they express the uniqueness of God's creation of each person and God's desire that persons utilize his creation gifts in kingdom ministry. God richly blessed me throughout this project. I am excited to continue to assist laypersons at Christ Church in discovering and engaging their strengths in ministry and observing how this process transforms the church culture.

In addition to the work at Christ Church and Versailles UMC, I have been able to train a group of pastors to implement a strengths-based ministry process in their churches. I taught a group of lay leaders in a neighboring district about equipping laity for ministry, and I look forward to future opportunities to share what God has given me. I find it an amazingly exciting experience to witness someone coming to grips with the fact that when God created him or her, he created a masterpiece.

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

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Title of Study: *Equipping the Saints through a Strengths-Based Ministry Process*

Researcher: Rev. Christopher Howlett

Institution: Asbury Theological Seminary

Introduction: This is a study of effect on psychological well-being of a researcher-designed strengths-based ministry process.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact on psychological well-being of laypersons at Christ Church United Methodist in Lexington, Kentucky, and Versailles United Methodist Church in Versailles, Kentucky, who participated in a strengths-based ministry process.

Procedures: You will take the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales both prior to and following the ministry process. You will attend the Serving with Your Strengths seminar and an individualized coaching session. You will be interviewed about your experience. Your responses will be recorded via digital voice recorder and transcribed by the researcher. The interview will last no longer than one hour.

Possible risks and benefits to you: There is no physical risk to you in participating in the study and no direct benefit to you. Your participation in the interview and the research project will, however, provide valuable data on how equipping laity using their strengths in ministry can be beneficial to other laity who may participate in the ministry process at a later date.

Right of refusal to participate and right to ask questions: You have the right at any time to refuse to participate in the Ryff Scales, interview, or refuse to answer certain interview questions. If you have questions about the study, please contact the researcher at any time using the information listed on the header of this letter of informed consent.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept anonymous and only non-identifying information from the interviews will be used in the publication of the study. The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed to text. The audio files will be stored in a password-protected external hard drive and placed in a

locked file box stored in the locked file cabinet of the researcher's home office. The computer text file from the eventual text transcription of the interview will be also be stored on a password-protected flash drive in a locked file box in the locked file cabinet of the researcher's home office. Any computer files relating to the interviews temporarily stored on the researcher's computer will be password protected.

The undersigned gives consent to be interviewed for the study assuming the conditions outlined above.

Printed Name of Interviewee: _____

Signed (Interviewee)_____

Date: _____

Signed (Researcher)_____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

RYFF SCALES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The following set of questions deals with how you feel about yourself and your life. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers.

[Each question was set in a table with a list of six numbered responses and the following instructions.]

Circle the number that best describes your present agreement or disagreement with each statement.

(1) Strongly Agree. (2) Disagree Somewhat. (3) Disagree Slightly. (4) Agree Slightely. (5) Agree Somewhat. (6) Strongly Agree.

1. Most people see me as loving and affectionate.
2. Sometimes I change the way I act or think to be more like those around me.
3. In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live.
4. I am not interested in activities that will expand my horizons.
5. I feel good when I think of what I've done in the past and what I hope to do in the future.
6. When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out.
7. Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me.
8. I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people.
9. The demands of everyday life often get me down.
10. In general, I feel that I continue to learn more about myself as time goes by.
11. I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future.
12. In general, I feel confident and positive about myself.
13. I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns.
14. My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing.
15. I do not fit very well with the people and the community around me.
16. I am the kind of person who likes to give new things a try.
17. I tend to focus on the present, because the future nearly always brings me problems.
18. I feel like many of the people I know have gotten more out of life than I have.
19. I enjoy personal and mutual conversations with family members or friends.
20. I tend to worry about what other people think of me.
21. I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life.
22. I don't want to try new ways of doing things - my life is fine the way it is.
23. I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.
24. Given the opportunity, there are many things about myself that I would change.
25. It is important to me to be a good listener when close friends talk to me about their problems.
26. Being happy with myself is more important to me than having others approve of me.
27. I often feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities.

28. I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world.
29. My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me.
30. I like most aspects of my personality.
31. I don't have many people who want to listen when I need to talk.
32. I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.
33. If I were unhappy with my living situation, I would take effective steps to change it.
34. When I think about it, I haven't really improved much as a person over the years.
35. I don't have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life.
36. I made some mistakes in the past, but I feel that all in all everything has worked out for the best.
37. I feel like I get a lot out of my friendships.
38. People rarely talk to me into doing things I don't want to do.
39. I generally do a good job of taking care of my personal finances and affairs.
40. In my view, people of every age are able to continue growing and developing.
41. I used to set goals for myself, but that now seems like a waste of time.
42. In many ways, I feel disappointed about my achievements in life.
43. It seems to me that most other people have more friends than I do.
44. It is more important to me to "fit in" with others than to stand alone on my principles
45. I find it stressful that I can't keep up with all of the things I have to do each day.
46. With time, I have gained a lot of insight about life that has made me a stronger, more capable person.
47. I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.
48. For the most part, I am proud of who I am and the life I lead.
49. People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others.
50. I have confidence in my opinions, even if they are contrary to the general consensus.
51. I am good at juggling my time so that I can fit everything in that needs to be done.
52. I have a sense that I have developed a lot as a person over time.
53. I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself.
54. I envy many people for the lives they lead.
55. I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others.
56. It's difficult for me to voice my own opinions on controversial matters.
57. My daily life is busy, but I derive a sense of satisfaction from keeping up with everything.
58. I do not enjoy being in new situations that require me to change my old familiar ways of doing things.
59. Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.
60. My attitude about myself is probably not as positive as most people feel about themselves.
61. I often feel as if I'm on the outside looking in when it comes to friendships.
62. I often change my mind about decisions if my friends or family disagree.
63. I get frustrated when trying to plan my daily activities because I never accomplish the things I set out to do.
64. For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.
65. I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.
66. Many days I wake up feeling discouraged about how I have lived my life.

67. I know that I can trust my friends, and they know they can trust me.
68. I am not the kind of person who gives in to social pressures to think or act in certain ways.
69. My efforts to find the kinds of activities and relationships that I need have been quite successful.
70. I enjoy seeing how my views have changed and matured over the years.
71. My aims in life have been more a source of satisfaction than frustration to me.
72. The past had its ups and downs, but in general, I wouldn't want to change it.
73. I find it difficult to really open up when I talk with others.
74. I am concerned about how other people evaluate the choices I have made in my life.
75. I have difficulty arranging my life in a way that is satisfying to me.
76. I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.
77. I find it satisfying to think about what I have accomplished in life.
78. When I compare myself to friends and acquaintances, it makes me feel good about who I am.
79. My friends and I sympathize with each other's problems.
80. I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important.
81. I have been able to build a home and a lifestyle for myself that is much to my liking.
82. There is truth to the saying that you can't teach an old dog new tricks.
83. In the final analysis, I'm not so sure that my life adds up to much.
84. Everyone has their weaknesses, but I seem to have more than my share.

APPENDIX C

PROCESS EFFECTIVENESS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How would you describe your level of psychological well-being before and after the strengths-based ministry process?

   Follow-up: What changes, if any, have you experienced in the area of personal growth during the strengths-based ministry process?

   Follow-up: What changes, if any, have you experienced in your feelings or thoughts about purpose and meaning in life during the strengths-based ministry process?

2. What parts, if any, of the strengths-based ministry process affected your level of psychological well-being?
3. How was the seminar effective or ineffective in assisting you to understand your strengths in the context of ministry?
4. How was the coaching session effective or ineffective in equipping you to use your strengths in ministry?
5. How has your level of ministry participation changed following the strengths-based ministry process?

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